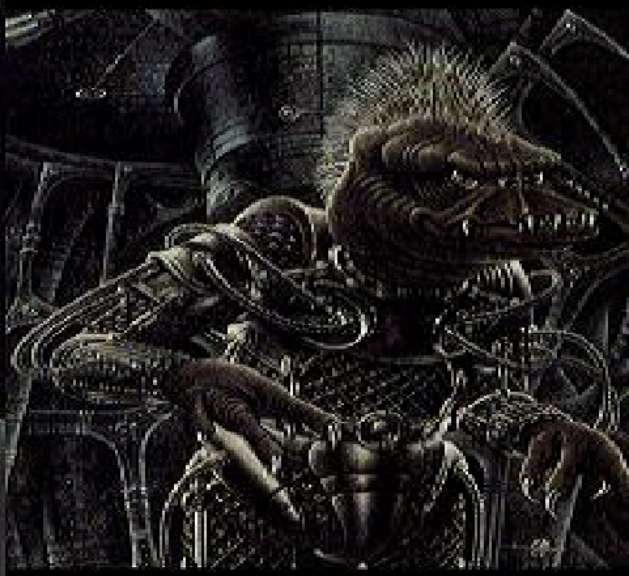
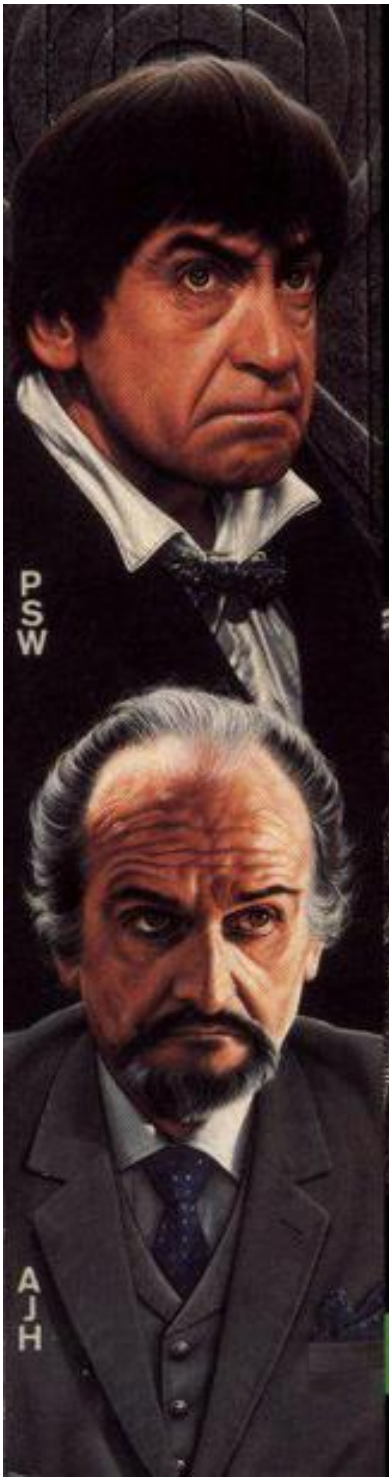
DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES



THE DARK PATH

DAVID A. MCINTEE



DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES

THE DARK PATH

DAVID A. MCINTEE

THE DARK PATH

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL FEATURING THE SECOND DOCTOR, JAMIE AND VICTORIA.

‘HE’S ONE OF MY OWN PEOPLE, VICTORIA, AND HE’S HUNTING ME.’

Darkheart: a faded neutron star surrounded by dead planets. But there is life on one of these icy rocks – the last enclave of the Earth Empire, frozen in the image of another time. As the rest of the galaxy enjoys the fruits of the fledgling Federation, these isolated Imperials, bound to obey a forgotten ideal, harbour a dark obsession.

The Doctor, Jamie and Victoria arrive to find that the Federation has at last come to reintegrate this lost colony, whether they like it or not. But all is not well in the Federation camp: relations and allegiances are changing.

The fierce Veltrochni – angered by the murder of their kinsmen – have an entirely different agenda. And someone else is manipulating the mission for his own mysterious reasons – another time traveller, a suave and assured master of his work.

The Doctor must uncover the terrible secret which brought the Empire to this desolate sector, and find the source of the strange power maintaining their society. But can a Time Lord, facing the ultimate temptation, control his own desires?

This adventure takes place between the television stories THE WEB OF FEAR and FURY FROM THE DEEP, and after the Missing Adventure TWILIGHT OF THE GODS.

David A. McIntee has written three New Adventures and two previous Missing Adventures. Unlikely as it seems, he is in touch with reality – he says it's a nice place to visit, but he wouldn't like to live there.

THE

DARK PATH

David A. McIntee

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London W10 5AH

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And Now for a Word. . .

Well, here we are again, for, I fear, the last time. I hope we've had some interesting times, you and I. If not, well, why did you payout the money for this? I've had an interesting time over the last four or five years anyway. (Ye gods, has it been that long?) Anyway, if I should wander away from the world of *Dr Who*, hopefully there is some corner of a Forbidden Planet that will remain forever Scotland. . .

Special thanks this time go to Alister Pearson for the likenesses of Troughton and Delgado. (The creature was supposed to look more like a cross between a Klingon and a Predator than one of the Toads from Bucky O'Hare, but it does *look* like a sixties SF costume. . .) Also due some of the credit is Roger Clark, for help with the research into Victoria's episodes.

Now, after those two action-based books, I promised you something more introspective last time, didn't I? As a wise man once said, I am a man of my word; in the end, that's all there is. . . Onward and

upward, if you'll forgive the C.S. Lewis; there are many other worlds to write, both licensed and original. Maybe we'll meet again in one of them. So, there isn't much else to say except: let's see what's out there. . .

(Or, if we don't meet again: it was fun.)

And remember: once you start down the dark path, forever will it domin– Oh, I can't say that can I? It's copyrighted. Well, you know what I mean!

For Jill the Time Meddler, fondly –

thank you for always being there for me;

and Judith Proctor –

now you know why *The First Casualty* was so late!

In Memory of my Aunt, Rose Gardiner

Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits. . .

– Macbeth

I've wasted all my lives because of you, Doctor. . .

– The (ersatz) Master to the eighth Doctor Contents

And Now for a Word. . .

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Prologue

Therewasrarelyanytraffic throughthestarlessgapbetweenthe great spiral arms of the Galaxy. Here, the void of intergalactic space began to curl inward towards the heart of the vast island of stars. Flying into this gap was like sailing out into a vast estuary that opened up into an ocean of nothingness.

There was always someone willing to push the boundaries of what was known, though. Exploration, expansion or simple wanderlust was a prerequisite of any spacefaring power. Even out here on the fringes of the darkness, it was not impossible to detect five metallic forms filing through the abyss at a stately pace.

The dimly lit hall rang to the joyously swelling sound of hoarse voices cheering a toast. The dark metal walls reverberated as clawed fists pounded on tables. Pack-Leader Fyshakh was as enthusiastic in his applause as the others in the hall. The communicator set into the forearm of his armour hooted softly, and Fyshakh stepped outside the

hall to answer it. ‘Yes?’

‘My apologies, Pack-Leader, but we are receiving sensor readings you may wish to see.’

Fyshakh’s jaws drew inwards irritably. Work was an unwelcome intrusion at times like this. Sometimes leisure was as important to the community as work. ‘I will be over shortly.’ He returned briefly to the hall, raised his tankard one last time, drained it in a gulp, and set off for the transmat bay.

He could have had quarters on the Dragon cruiser, of course, but he wanted to keep his place of work and his family home separate. The journey helped delineate his duties as head of the extended household of Pack Huthakh, and his duties as a starship’s commander. The two were not so easily separable, however as the five ships in his flotilla 1

were all that formed Pack Huthakh. He didn’t mind, though: such a small family was in many ways closer together than a larger House would be.

Fyshakh stepped into one of the transport’s transmat cubicles, and almost immediately stepped out of a similar cubicle aboard the Dragon cruiser. He quickly made his way through to the high-roofed triangular metal vault of the flight deck. He saw at once what had so interested the officer of the day.

In the main viewing cube, another ship was moving against the blackness. Once the problem of aerodynamics was out of the way, most races designed their spacecraft with some kind of aesthetic or cultural style; even the soulless Daleks had an unfathomable predilection for disc-shaped craft. The ship on the scanner, however, had no such architectural grace. For the most part it was but a number of spheres and pods linked together by a scaffolding of struts. Strange bas-relief carvings were wrapped around all the sections, with some sort of leaves moulded on to the tubular struts, and a grimacing brassy face bulging from the forward sphere.

As far as Fyshakh could recall, only the Empire was ever so unconcerned with proper design. Armour creaking, he sat on the command couch. ‘Is that an Earth ship?’

One of the Veltrochni in the work pit called up an image from the ship’s database into a viewing cube. ‘It appears to be an Imperial destroyer.’ He turned, his jaws sliding forward into a slightly greedy expression. ‘It is perfectly preserved. If it were to be salvaged the

value of such a relic would be –'

Fyshakh's dorsal spines flattened.

'You think like a Usurian.'

Nonetheless, the idea had some appeal: building ships for such a new Pack was becoming more expensive every hatching season. He dropped to the floor, and moved along the command balcony to peer over the crewman's shoulder. Tiny energy spikes were showing up on the sensor display. 'There is energy emanating from that ship. . . '

'Exactly what will increase its value. An Imperial ship with a still-functioning power core would be priceless to the Earthmen.'

'Perhaps.' If the power core and drive unit were functioning, then 2

life-support might still be on, too. That led Fyshakh to a thought that was simply incredible. 'I wonder. . . Can you tell where it is going?'

'But it's a derelict; it must be after this length of time.'

'Project its course.' A red line arced through the viewing cube, terminating at a dull speck quite close to the ship's current position.

Fyshakh couldn't help but notice that the curved course indicated that the destination was also the ship's most likely point of origin. That bring the case, it was probably on some sort of patrol. He poked a claw at the dull speck in the cube. 'What is that place?'

'A red giant with a companion neutron star. Most strange – I'm reading gravitational perturbations. . . ' The sensor operator manipulated his console, his spines rustling. 'It appears to have a planetary system.

He sounded as surprised as Fyshakh felt. There are energy spikes on one planet, very close to the stars. I am detecting human life-signs on both the Imperial ship and the planet.'

Fyshakh remained silent for a moment. 'Compile the sensor data on the inhabited planet and send it to the Federation Chair on Alpha Centauri. Tell them we shall investigate further.'

ISS *Foxhound*'s flight deck was as sterile as any operating theatre.

Chrome gleamed here and there against the white walls, and the command crew's black uniforms stood out starkly.

Captain Colley hated the decor, of course: the glare from the white walls constantly swamped details on the main viewer. ‘Lights fifty percent,’ he grumbled as he entered. The ship’s automatics obediently dimmed the lights, making the image in the main holotank become much more comprehensible. Colley seated himself behind the command console, and scratched at his reddish curls. ‘All right, what is it?’

The deck officer, a lieutenant, came over with a salute. ‘We picked up a transmission from a local source, sir – about us.’

‘From the city?’

‘No, a convoy of some kind – five ships.’ He touched a control on the command console, bringing up a magnified image in the holotank.

It showed five tiny computer-enhanced spacecraft. Four were vast 3

transport liners, bulky and graceless like swollen bumblebees led by a sleeker vessel whose lines were that of a gargantuan dragonfly. The lead ship was the only one that registered as being armed, and was obviously a warship of some kind. ‘They only entered sensor range just after the transmission was sent. We’re ready to jam any further transmissions, of course.’

‘Obviously their sensor technology is better than ours. Who are they?’

‘We’re not sure, but the recognition software analyses the design style as being Veltrochni.’

‘What did the transmission say?’

‘It’s to the “Federation Chair” on Alpha Centauri, saying they register human life-signs here. They are coming to investigate further.’

Colley wondered what this Federation was. Perhaps some evolution of the Rimworld Alliance? Surely the Empire wouldn’t tolerate another power so close to Earth. He shivered involuntarily. ‘Open a link to the Adjudication Lodge. I want to speak to Viscount Gothard.’

The Adjudication Lodge was a gleaming multifaceted castle of chrome and glass. Under the light of the distant red sun, it shone with the shape and tint of the bloodied edge of a broken bottle. The constant rain that was a by-product of the atmospheric processors washed down the sides of the building with its own red-lit tint, The complex was an arcology of sorts, with shafts sunk through the circular

building complex to allow light to get into the surprisingly well-tended park at its hub.

Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell looked down on the park from the Governor's suite of offices in the highest shard. He looked, but didn't really see anything; his mind was so accustomed to the sight that he blocked it out as he blocked out the smell of the processed air.

Viscount Gothard had received a call from one of the picket ships, und was yapping away into the viewing cube, leaving Terrell's mind to wander distractedly.

Terrell hated being bored, and unconsciously scanned the ground below in the hope that something would happen there that would 4

demand his attention. As it was, even the view was impeded by the reflection of his own immaculately tailored blue uniform, solid face and thinning sandy hair.

The Viscount, by contrast, was a scrawny individual m a flashy civilian suit. Gothard claimed he had to maintain the appearance of so-phistication to show that he was still mindful of his rank. Terrell knew that really he just liked dressing up to impress those women who wanted to sleep with someone in the government.

'. . . the message was addressed to the "Federation Chair", sir,' Colley's voice said. The words brought Terrell out of his reverie. He turned to see Gothard dismiss the information with a wave.

'It doesn't matter who it's to, Captain. They are trespassing in Imperial space, and putting the project at risk. Attack the invaders at once, Captain. We can't compromise our position here any further.'

Terrell tutted softly, causing the Viscount to look round irritably.

The Adjudicator In Extremis waggled a finger at him admonishingly.

'You can't be compromised by degrees: you either are, or are not. In this case we already are.' He steepled his fingers, looking over them towards the viewing cube. 'This may be a piece of good fortune, in a way. If their technology is more advanced than ours, it might be able to help us here.'

In the cube, Colley's image nodded. 'What do you suggest, sir?'

'Destroy the transports – they are irrelevant. The lead cruiser is

another matter. Try to eliminate the crew but take the ship itself intact.

We can download their data core and see if there's anything in there that will help us prepare for whoever comes in answer to their signal.

After that, dispose of the wreckage in whatever manner you see fit –

just as long as it doesn't lead back to us.'

'Aye, sir.' The holographic Colley looked over at Viscount Gothard, who nodded. Colley faded from the viewing cube.

Looking out from his ratlike face, Gothard's eyes glared up at Terrell. 'What was that about? You know the laws on Imperial space violations.'

Terrell nodded boredly. 'And you know what we need. Every little helps.'

5

* * *

The silver and white cluster of metal that was ISS *Foxhound* pitched to the side, taking up a new course towards the alien ships.

Colley strapped himself in behind his console as the other officers did the same at their stations. 'This is your captain speaking,' he announced into the intercom. 'All hands to battle stations. This is not a drill.' He nodded to the lieutenant. 'Jam their transmissions, but keep a record of the transponder codes. Activate the defence field.'

The weapons officer looked round from her station. 'Orders, sir?'

'Arm EM warheads and target the cruiser. Lock main cannons on the first transport.'

'Warheads armed and homing set. Cannons locked on target. Seventeen seconds to cannon range.'

Timing was a vital skill here, Colley knew. 'Fire EM warheads.'

Fyshakh stood on the command balcony, watching the Imperial ship with interest as it swung around to head towards them. 'Hail them. Tell them we have notified their people that they appear to be stranded here.'

The communications officer turned to obey, then looked up from his place in the work pit. ‘I can’t raise them. Our signals are being jammed.’

‘From where?’

‘From the human ship.’

Fyshakh’s spines settled slightly. Why would the humans jam their attempts to communicate? The only possible reason was that they didn’t want anyone to know what they were doing here; and that meant that he already knew too much. . . ‘Raise the shields!’ Hopefully the pilots of the transports would register that on their sensors and do the same. Fyshakh didn’t like to think of the alternative.

‘Raising –’

The Dragon lurched, a thunderclap vibrating through the air as if the ship were a huge bell. The blast threw Fyshakh off the balcony and on to a console in the work pit. The bridge went completely dark for a moment, then the consoles glimmered back to life, all their monitors awash with static. Another impact rocked the cruiser, pitching the 6

bridge into blackness once again. The green emergency lights came on, and Fyshakh could see that all the consoles were dark but for a faint haze of visual white noise. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Electromagnetic pulse. All main power is off-line. Shields and weapons are down, and we’ve lost all motive power. We’ve only got life-support and gravity left.’

The cubs, Fyshakh thought wildly, then restrained himself ‘Reboot the system. Get me emergency power!’

In the *Foxhound*’s main holotank, the alien warship’s drive exhaust and running lights had faded and died, and it was starting to go into a slow spin. ‘The invaders’ energy output has dropped by ninety-six per cent,’ the weapons officer reported. ‘Now in cannon range.’

Colley nodded. ‘Take down the transports.’

The swollen transports began to break formation as their pilots realized what was happening: They were too late as Colley had judged they would be.

The gleaming Imperial destroyer banked aside, giving its portside

weapon pods a clear strafing run at three of the transports. Hammerblows of agitated particles slammed into the unshielded hulls, punching through the plating and throwing out plumes of superheated metal.

The nearest transport suddenly disintegrated in a cloud of metallic particles, as its reactor core was hit. A cluster of particle bolts concentrated on the next ship and it too bloomed into a flower of fire.

In the main Hall of Pack Huthakh, alarms suddenly blared out through the drunken revelry, startling everyone into alertness. Before anyone could query the reason for the alarm, a shaft of blazing energy sheared through the room from floor to ceiling. The energy beam stripped the molecules of the atmosphere apart, its heat scalding the revellers to death in the wink of an eye. The tableau of startled dead were blown out through the holes in the hull mere instants before their ship too died in a spreading fireball.

* * *

7

The two remaining transports tried to break away, but they were too late. Further Imperial firepower pounded into them, and they in turn were blasted apart. The blooms of fire that marked their passing soon faded in the *Foxhound*'s holotank, and Colley brought up the image of the warship. 'Reduce cannon power output; let's just leave enough to drill a few small holes through their hull. That'll space the ship, then we'll go over in environment suits and see what we can salvage.'

'I'm reading numerous life-sign concentrations.'

'Do the largest first.'

Fyshakh paced the command balcony with frustration and not a little fear. The fear wasn't for his own fate, of course, but for the transports.

With all the power down, he couldn't even see whether they still existed, let alone communicate with them. It was as if an urge to rush around was crawling up his torso.

The flight crew had ripped out the console inspection panels, and were working furiously, but so far to no avail. Fyshakh understood why primitive leaders often seemed to feel the need to abuse their workers when things weren't going well. He clamped down on the feeling, reminding himself that it was more a human trait than

anything else. Right now he didn't want to share any behaviour with those humans.

The ship rocked again, with a distant booming sound. Fyshakh looked round, but saw no new damage. Perhaps the humans were so unsure of their own capabilities that they felt the need to send in another EM warhead. He went back to overseeing the repairs, paying little attention to the slight breeze that ruffled the blueprints strewn under the emergency lights.

His head snapped round as he finally saw the breeze for what it was. It was blowing in the direction of the open pressure doors at the rear of the flight deck. 'We've got a hull breach,' he hissed.

One of the other officers looked across at the doors. 'The power loss

– it has shut off the emergency bulkhead seals!'

Dorsal spines flattening, Fyshakh rushed over to the doors as the breeze increased. If he could just find the manual locking wheel. . .

8

'Help me. We must get the door closed or-

A searing beam of energy punched through the ceiling, and the remaining air rushed towards the hole, carrying Fyshakh and the others with it. They struggled against the flow as they were blown towards the breach, but this only succeeded in making them gasp for breath that wasn't there.

In the end, it was only corpses that were exhaled from the flight deck in a tangled spume.

9

One

A battered wooden British police telephone box from the early part of the twentieth century sail through an entirely different kind of space. Inside its blue-painted wood-and-concrete frame was a surprisingly large room. The white walls were indented with ser-ried roundels, while a cylindrical column containing strange illuminated filaments rose and fell at the heart of a hexagonal console covered in dials, switches, and electronic read-outs. As if to confound the observer further, the room also contained an eclectic mixture of brie-a-brac

from various eras, such as an ormolu clock and a Louis XIV

chair.

James Robert McCrimmon, Jamie to those who knew him, couldn't help but feel that the contrast between the console room and its furnishings was, heightened by the people in it. He himself was a fresh-faced young man with the lean build of someone used to running around in all weathers. Although his turtleneck sweater was fairly nondescript, the kilt he wore announced his Caledonian origins even before his accent could. He yawned loudly, having just awakened from a doze in the Louis XIV. 'Morning, Doctor.'

'Is it? I'm not really sure. . . Could easily be teatime.' The other man in the room, the Doctor, was shorter, with a lugubrious face topped by a Beatle-mop hairstyle. He wore baggy checked trousers and a rather disreputable frock coat over a pale-blue shirt. A large spotted red handkerchief was stuffed into his coat's breast pocket. He was looking at the starfield on the scanner screen. He switched off the scanner and turned back to the hexagonal console. 'Sleep well?'

'I was just resting my eyes.'

'And exercising your snoring muscles.'

Jamie looked around. 'Hey, where's Victoria?'

'Oh, I think she's gone to change. She wasn't happy about all 11

that isocryte grit from wandering around on Vortis, and she's gone off to find something cleaner in the TARDIS's wardrobe.' The Doctor stepped back from his examination of the console, rubbing his hands in satisfaction. 'There we are, the TARDIS is working perfectly.'

'Oh aye? That would be a first.'

'Well, all right, as perfectly as usual, then. The important thing is that there's no more sign of interference from Lloigor.'

'Loy-what?'

'The Animus.'

'Then it's gone for good after all?' That would be a good thing as far as Jamie was concerned. The cancerlike Intelligence that had tried to grow across Vortis was one of the nastiest opponents Jamie could

envision. Even the Cybermen were more bearable, since at least they could be killed individually, albeit with considerable effort.

'Oh well, that one has gone, yes.' The Doctor pulled an orange from somewhere in a baggy pocket, and started to unpeel it. 'There were several Lloigor originally, but the one that came through to our Universe used an awful lot of energy to get here, so I doubt that any others will be willing or able to expend enough strength to try anything so dramatic again.' He frowned expressively, bending to look at a flashing lamp on the console. 'I say, that's very odd.'

Jamie groaned inwardly. It seemed the TARDIS was always on the verge of falling apart. He supposed that the Doctor's assessment of the TARDIS working as perfectly was normal was accurate. 'Don't tell me it's gone wrong again!'

The Doctor jumped at the sound of Jamie's voice. He recovered himself quickly. 'No, well, not exactly.' The Doctor tapped the instrument on the console. It was flashing softly. 'This is sort of a. . . a time path indicator. It shows whether there's another time machine on our flight path.'

'Ye mean another TARDIS?'

The Doctor opened his mouth to answer, then paused silently for a few moments. 'Not necessarily. . . ' He looked up to make sure that they were alone in the room and lowered his voice. 'The last time it became active, it was a Dalek time machine that was following the 12

TARDIS.'

'Daleks! Aw, no.' Now Jamie understood the Doctor's checking that Victoria hadn't entered the room. Her father, Edward Waterfield, had been killed by the Daleks when Jamie and the Doctor first met her.

Even the slightest hint that they might encounter the creatures again could upset her, and neither of them wanted that. 'Here, I thought you said we saw their final end?'

'Well, anything's possible with the Daleks. The thing to remember is that, with time travel, we could encounter other Daleks from a time before what happened to us on Skaro.' This sort of thing made Jamie's head spin. In the bloody aftermath of Culloden, with the Duke of Cumberland conducting the sorts of operation that later generations classed as war crimes, he and his fellow Jacobites had had other things on their mind than quantum physics. 'Anyway, there's no need

to worry too much yet – there are several other races who can travel through time. Why, even human beings occasionally manage to develop workable time machines.'

Jamie was on more solid ground now. 'Aye, like Waterfield and Maxtible – and look where it got them.'

'Yes, it's best to leave these sorts of things to the experts.' The Doctor moved round the console, clearing his throat. 'Still, just to be on the safe side, I think we'll quietly slip out of the way. I mean, we don't want to crash into them, do we?'

'Definitely not.' Jamie wasn't fooled for a minute. Obviously the Doctor was keen to avoid this other time machine on more general principles, but this was the Doctor's way, so Jamie humoured him as usual.

As the Doctor busied himself at the console, Victoria came into the room, now wearing a more modest, late-1930s-style trouser suit.

Jamie shook his head teasingly, as if in disappointment. Victoria gave him a mock-haughty look. 'Have I missed anything?' she asked.

The Doctor barely looked up, concentrating entirely on the time path indicator. Jamie didn't like the look of this at all: it was most unlike the Doctor to be so subdued. He took Victoria aside before she could ask any awkward questions. 'The Doctor's just making a 13

wee course correction, to. . . ' Jamie searched frantically for a suitable reason. 'To make the journey smoother.'

With impeccable timing, the TARDIS immediately lurched to one side, sending Jamie and Victoria reeling into the console. 'Smoother?'

Jamie went slightly red at being caught out like that.

The Doctor straightened. 'That's better. They'll have a job following that,' he muttered, half to himself.

'They?' Victoria echoed.

'Yes, another TA–' The Doctor coughed. 'Another time machine of some kind. Nothing for you to worry about I'm sure. Nothing to worry about at all.' Jamie caught Victoria's expression as she looked at him, and his heart sank, as he could see that she obviously didn't believe a word of it either.

The survey ship *Piri Reis* could never have been mistaken for a craft produced by the old Earth Empire. Where Imperial ships had always been utilitarian collections of spheres and cylinders wrapped in scaffolding and gilded with baroque and inappropriate decoration, the *Piri Reis* was a product of Terileptil architecture and human construction. Its gentle white curves had a swanlike grace, and it seemed to be floating serenely upon an invisible pool.

The interior was equally graceful, but in slightly more sterile fashion. As usual with starships, the walls, floor and ceiling were all smooth and white, but honeycombed panels helped give the impression of greater space, while at the same time breaking up the reflective surfaces so that the rooms simply seemed clean and spacious rather than claustrophobically blinding.

Muted light sources behind the panels kept the corridors and operational areas of the ship lit with the air of a pleasant summer morning, but without the excessive heat.

Captain Gillian Sherwin was quite short and slim, with a cheery face and long dark hair that was tied tightly back. Every ship's captain had their own personal quirks, some more serious than others, but the crew of the *Piri Reis* had long since got used to Sherwin's preference for walking around barefoot, even on duty on the flight deck. There

were exceptions, of course: when visiting the hangar or engineering decks, or at times of crisis, safety came first. Even though the deck plates were chilly under her soles at times, she still felt more comfortable this way, and nobody questioned her any more. Besides, she'd yet to see a Terileptil wear shoes either. So, nobody commented as she crossed the flight deck to consult a recording from the Veltrochni sensors.

The planet was a red curve, an arc of bloodied talon. Its dull iron surface glowed with reflected light from the swollen red giant beyond, as if the planet was literally red hot. The neutron star wasn't actually visible, but fingers of plasma were gently swirling out from the giant into a glowing disc of incandescent gases. The neutron star, of course, was at the centre of the diaphanous disc.

Sherwin didn't like the look of it at all. When the combination of the neutron star and the surrounding accretion disc of matter dragged from the red giant reached critical mass, the disc would be blown off in a nova. This process would repeat itself over and over again for

millions of years.

The flight deck of the *Piri Reis* was rectangular, longest along the fore-to-aft axis. Rows of consoles backed on to one another on either side of a central aisle. A wide semicircular viewing platform jutted out of the forward end, separated from space by only a curving transparent wall. Sherwin turned away from the infernal gaze of that red eye, to meet the owner of the footsteps she could hear approaching the viewport. 'Yes?'

'My Lady,' Salamanca said, with his inevitable bow. She was half surprised he didn't stoop like that all the time they talked, because her tiny frame meant her head barely came up to the Draconian's chest.

She had long since decided that he was a very nice person to be around, though his unwavering formality was sometimes a little annoying. She wished she could order him to loosen up a little, but reminded herself that it took all sorts.

Sherwin had been surprised, at first, that a Draconian would take orders from or show respect to a female of any species. As Sala-15

manca's easy adaptation had proved, though, once the Draconians decided to do something, they followed its provisions to the letter.

Once allied with Earth and the other cooperative worlds, the Draconians had become sticklers for equality, since equality was expected among those worlds. She supposed it was something to do with being brought up in a society where rules were most definitely not made to be broken. Give a Draconian rules, and he would follow them.

'Ready for another exciting day in paradise, Salamanca?'

'It will be a wonder if I can conduct the day's inspections without bursting from joy,' he answered drily. 'Your definition of paradise must differ from mine.'

'We Scorpios are optimists.'

He tilted his high-crested head to one side. 'Draconia has no astrology.'

She smiled. 'Sounds very sensible, but no fun. Call a senior staff meeting for an hour from now – I want us all to be ready when we reach this colony.'

The Doctor had fetched some sandwiches for lunch, but Jamie noticed that his eyes still kept wandering round, checking on the time path indicator, whenever he thought his companions weren't looking.

Jamie had travelled with the Doctor for considerably longer than Victoria, but he had never seen him so unsettled. If anything could unsettle the Doctor, then Jamie was concerned, because it must be something worse than the Cybermen, Yeti or other beasties they had faced. He wondered whether he should share his concerns with Victoria, but suspected that the last thing she needed was more worries.

As if summoned by thought, Victoria returned to the console room.

She held up a book. 'Look, Jamie, I've found another one: *Robinson Crusoe*.'

'Oh, right.' Over the past few months, Victoria had been teaching Jamie to read. In his time, reading was for secretaries, politicians and clergymen, not the ordinary people; but he had had to admit that the ability came in useful, especially when the Doctor set him occasional tasks monitoring the console to keep him out of mischief. He took 16

the book, and noted with satisfaction that the dust jacket said it had Scottish origins.

'I'll start right –' He stopped, unsure if he was really seeing what he thought he was seeing, or whether it was just some trick of his eyes.

He blinked to be sure, and Victoria turned round to follow his gaze.

A faint ripple, like a heat haze, flickered briefly across the room.

It shimmered through the console, and faded into the wall opposite.

Jamie blinked again, and looked at the Doctor. 'Did you see that?'

The Doctor looked back, green eyes startled and wide. 'Yes I did, Jamie. Most peculiar.' He went round to the part of the wall where it had first appeared, and tapped it suspiciously.

'I saw it too,' Victoria put in. 'Like a mirage on the road in summer.'

'Yes, very peculiar indeed.' The Doctor went back to the console, and began examining the dials.

'Well what was it then?' Jamie asked plaintively. A suspicion came to

him, and he pointed at the console panel where the Doctor had been working earlier. ‘Something to do with yon time path thing, I suppose.’

‘No, I don’t think so, Jamie. No. . . ’ He looked up with a frown.

‘Whatever it was must have come in from outside.’

‘Outside the TARDIS?’ Victoria asked. ‘But I thought nothing could do that.’

‘Not normally, but some sort of time distortion, perhaps. . . ’ He ran round the console, checking every single dial and read-out. ‘No, there’s nothing.’ He made a few adjustments to the controls. ‘Right, I’ll just materialize in the nearest suitable biosphere to get our bear-ings, just in case. . . ’

‘Oh, Doctor,’ Victoria almost wailed. ‘You promised to take us somewhere less harrowing this time.’

‘Oh, I’m sure it will be. Well, fairly sure. . . ’ Jamie and Victoria exchanged knowing looks, and Jamie handed the book back to Victoria.

It would just have to wait.

For once Ipthiss wasn’t in the main engineering hall, and Sherwin had to go to what was originally the auxiliary hangar to find him.

17

Somewhat surreally, the Terileptil was standing between the pincers of a bulbous, midnight-blue, winged scorpion roughly the size of a groundcar. In fact he was gently stroking the shutters over its eyes.

A faint air of cloves hung in the hangar, and Sherwin understood the significance of the scent immediately. ‘Is it serious?’

Ipthiss turned at her approach, his jewelled scales glittering. ‘I hope not,’ he said in a measured tone. ‘Surgeon Hathaway has not yet completed his examination.’

Hathaway walked round from the far side of the docile creature, shaking his head in puzzlement. He was quite Latin-looking, with olive skin and black hair that was only just starting to grey almost imperceptibly. ‘A broken leg would be simple enough in a human, but

of course with a Xarax exoskeleton, the break is on the outside of the body. Probably caught it in the bay doors. I should be able to set it, but you'll have to take him off duty for a while, Ipthiss.'

'Most inconvenient,' Ipthiss murmured. 'I will spread his workload among the others as much as possible. The maintenance bots can handle the gaps.'

Sherwin nodded. 'I'd leave that confidence out of you logs if I were you, otherwise the appropriations board will cut your allowance by the value of at least one Xarax, You know what Centaurans are like.'

'Bureaucrats,' Ipthiss hissed in the sort of tone usually reserved for particularly foul epithets. His gills fluttered in a sigh. 'How long is a

"while", Surgeon?'

'A day or two. Shouldn't be more than that.'

'Then unless Protocol Officer Epilira asks, that will be no problem.'

A vast glass sky stretched overhead. Innumerable lamps, programmed to emit specific wavelengths of light, hung from the supports, while the baleful glare of a giant red sun shone ineffectually beyond.

Fields of simple vegetables nestled right beside long rows of tropical fruits, each with its own necessary sunlight streaming from the lamps above. On the sides of a low hill near the edge of the glass roof, several varieties of grape were cultivated in winding avenues of vines.

It was in one of these leafy corridors that a blue tint shaded the air.

18

As an ethereal howling and groaning ground to a halt, the blueness solidified into a tall blue box with a yellow light on top.

A few moments later, the Doctor stepped out, taking deep breaths of the soil-scented air, and checked a small box he held. All the little lamps on the box were unlit. As he dropped the box into a pocket, Jamie and Victoria followed him out. Jamie quite liked the smell of the air – it was slightly damp and earthy, like a Scottish hillside after a summer shower.

'There you are, Victoria, a peaceful vineyard.' He brightened and looked around, rubbing his hands. 'Hopefully some of the Earthpeople

here can tell us where we are.'

Jamie frowned. 'How do ye know there are Earthpeople here if ye don't know where here is?'

'Oh, Jamie,' Victoria squealed despairingly. 'Look at these vines.'

The Doctor plucked a grape from the nearest, and popped it into his mouth. 'Grapes are only native to Earth, Jamie. That means someone must have brought I hem here from Earth to set up this vineyard.' He paused to savour the grape he had eaten. 'Tastes like it's intended for a Moselle to me.'

'Well it's nice to know they've got their priorities right,' Jamie said drily. Victoria had walked along the row or vines, heading downhill, and the two men followed her. Although the light was a strange sort of evening twilight, it was quite warm.

Before long, Victoria halted. 'Doctor, look at this.' Ahead of her, several feet of vine had been torn away, leaving a ragged gap in the rows on both sides.

'Some sort of vandalism, I suppose.' He stepped through the hole in the left-hand row. The next row was similarly damaged. 'It looks as if someone has smashed their way downhill, just crashing straight through all the vines.'

Jamie looked at the squashed leaves and grapes scattered across the path, and then realized that he was seeing something else too.

'Or something – Look!' He pointed out a footprint in the earth. It was a bit indistinct, but was clear enough to be identified as that of a clawed, three-toed foot. Jamie carefully put his own booted foot in-19

side the print, and saw that the footprint extended a good inch further forward.

Victoria looked at the print nervously, while the Doctor knelt to examine it. 'It's quite fascinating. It's not unlike the pattern of a three-toed sloth, but you can see from the pressure pattern that whatever made this print was moving very, very quickly. Some sort of native animal, perhaps.'

'Aye, and also very large.'

'Oh yes, yes, I should say so. A good eight or nine feet tall I should

think. I wonder what it was.'

'Well, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not find out just yet.'

Jamie was curious too, of course, and if he'd been alone with the Doctor he would have been happy to go investigating. With Victoria around, though, he had to think about her safety first.

'Oh, I suppose you're right.' The Doctor straightened and started off along the path. 'We should find some so of road at the wall of this dome.' With little other choice Jamie and Victoria followed. As they went, the Doctor fished his recorder out of the depths of a pocket, and started playing a jaunty little tune to pace themselves with.

Once the three travellers had gone, a patch of vines shifted and warped as they were easily pushed out of way. The three newcomers were clearly not like the others here, and might bear closer inspection.

First, though, there was the box they had emerged from. It had materialized as if by transmat, and there could be communications equipment within. Even a series of heavy punches at the glass windows were totally ineffectual.

The sound, however, did attract some attention, and human voices could be heard from the other side of the low hill. The vines were still the most effective cover, so it was best to move back into them. The pod and its occupants could await further investigation, until after the hunters had gone.

Captain Sherwin herself was the last to arrive in t conference room. It was a lounge-like room, with comfortable armchairs and coffee tables

dotted around central podium. Salamanca pulled up a chair for her, already had a coffee waiting.

Surgeon Hathaway and Ipthiss sat with the military attache, Mei Quan, a tiny but lithe woman of Chinese ancestry. The monocular arthropod that was Epilira blinked its huge eye, and settled into a calmer green colour. Sherwin half expected Epilira to speak aloud and cajole her for being last to arrive, but the Centauran wisely and mercifully kept silent.

Clark, the fresh-faced communications officer, already at his terminal on the podium. A large holosphere was suspended above the seats before the podium. She nodded to him. 'What have you found for us,

Mr Clark?'

'Not that much, Captain,' he admitted with little sign of disappointment. 'When the Empress died, most of Centcomp's data structures fell apart. In addition, all sorts of cliques with Ultraviolet-level access to the system were messing around with what was left. Really we don't have that much knowledge about what was going on towards the end of the Empire.'

He set up an image in the holosphere, the bloodshot eye that was a red star alone in a black pool. 'All we know about this star system is from recovered fragments of purged flies. We have here a class K4 red supergiant. Luminosity minus a million or so, visible magnitude minus six; surface temperature can't be more than about three thousand Kelvin. There's also a neutron star companion. From the gravitational perturbations we're seeing in the giant, it looks to be about three point eight solar masses, and maybe nine kilometres across. That's right on the borderline; a fraction more mass and it would've gone into a black hole. We'll get more accurate readings when we drop out of hyperspace. There is one other thing. The system is a semi-detached binary, with a nova cycle of approximately seven thousand four hundred years. From the mass of the neutron star, and spectral readings of the accretion disc, it should flare up again in not less than fifteen hundred years.'

Sherwin was greatly relieved to hear it. 'Make sure Ipthiss keeps the engines tuned, just in case.'

'Of course.'

Clark continued. 'We also know there's at least one planet in the system, though how it survived the supernova that formed the neutron star is quite beyond me. It may have been a rogue body that became trapped by the binary's gravitational dynamics.'

'Yes,' Sherwin said irritably, 'but why did the Empire come out here?'

'I don't know,' Clark admitted sheepishly, 'According to the recovered data fragments, an Imperial Navy expeditionary force under overall control of the Special Services Directorate was sent out around the turn of the thirty-first century. No record of their mission was kept but the logistics records show that the usual SSD squadron was sent

– a carrier, two cruisers and two destroyers. There is a very puzzling

reference – all the records are cross-indexed by some other file, but it's totally gone. All we've got left is one word: "Darkheart".'

Salamanca looked at Sherwin. 'That makes some sense if there really is a planet in the system. This region is in the heart of the biggest patch of darkness in known space.'

She nodded; the theory sounded reasonable enough. 'Right, make a note that the planet is called Darkheart; if we learn differently when we arrive, so be it.' If nothing else, it was a lot quicker to say than

'unnamed planet that might or might not be there'.

'We have some more interesting contemporary data though,' Clark went on. 'Computer, replay that Veltrochni sensor log, and enhance the image in grid four-oh-four.'

The red sun faded from the darkness of space that filled the holosphere. A collection of metallic spheres an cylinders linked by gleaming spars zoomed into focus heading away from the sensor that had observed it. Sherwin was quite surprised, having seen such vessels only in museums. 'Ipthiss?'

The Terileptil hissed through his gills as he peered at the ship.

'Dauntless-class Imperial destroyer,' he said. 'Very well preserved. I should like to examine it, if the opportunity arises.' Despite the cold clarity of his voice, there was a hint of passion in the way he spoke about it. Engineers were all the same, Sherwin thought.

Hathaway frowned. 'There hasn't been a Dauntless-class ship built 22

in four hundred years. Unless they're making them here. . . '

Sherwin tried to cover an involuntary shiver. The thought of an unaccounted-for fleet of Imperial warships hanging around, even out here in the great beyond, was disquieting. 'Lieutenant, do you have the names of the ships sent by the SSD?'

Clark looked surprised at being asked for more.

'Ah, just a

minute. . . ' He consulted his terminal. 'The flagship was the carrier *Pendragon*, escorted by the cruisers *Tigris* and *Donau*, and the destroyers *Foxhound* and *Jaguar*.'

She nodded towards the destroyer in the holosphere. ‘Can you decode the transponder signal recorded from this ship here?’

‘I’ll give it a try.’ Clark programmed his terminal, and watched the scrolling display. ‘It is an Imperial code. . . ISS *Foxhound*.’ He looked slightly awed. ‘This seems to be the same ship that came out nearly half a millennium ago.’

‘Impressive,’ Ipthiss murmured. ‘Doubly so, without access to spare parts.’

‘They may have cannibalized the other vessels to keep this one running,’ Salamanca put in. ‘But if not, is it possible they could have maintained the entire squadron? I would not like us to walk blindly into a confrontation with five capital ships of the Earth Empire.’

Ipthiss bared square teeth in a Terileptil gesture of amusement. ‘Our designs are considerably more advanced than those of Earth five centuries ago. Even if they have the full squadron operational and hostile, our shields and engines will keep us safe.’

Sherwin nodded. ‘They’ll still only have space-warping engines, not quantum hyperdrive. If nothing else, we can outrun them. There’s a separate data registry for starship architecture, though, which might still contain their computer access codes, should they be needed. Look into that, Clark.’ It was probably too much to hope that the remote-access codes would have survived this long – or that the ships’ owners wouldn’t have changed them – but every angle ought to be covered.

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Then if there’s nothing else. . . ’ No one spoke. ‘I suggest you all make your preparations for arrival at Darkheart.’

Two

Thetrailofdestructionwaseasytofollow: whateverhadwrecked the vines had certainly not done it by halves. All six of the armoured Adjudicators who were patrolling the hillside could see that this wasn’t so much purposeful destruction, as just someone or something moving extremely single-mindedly.

One of them suddenly whistled to the others. When they looked, he pointed at something downslope from him, but hidden from their view

by the rows of vines. Everyone made their way towards him and then towards the object, and were surprised at the sight that greeted them. It was a large blue box.

The lead Adjudicator touched the communication switch on his belt, opening a channel to the Adjudication Lodge. ‘Adjudicator Paxton reporting. I’m at the vineyard, south side. There’s some damage to the vines. Looks like something’s charged clean through the rows.

There’s something else too: we’ve found a big cabinet of some kind.

Could be an escape pod, or a transmat capsule.’

‘Alien?’ a voice buzzed in his ear.

Paxton instinctively shrugged before recalling that the Adjudication Lodge couldn’t see his gesture over the audio link. ‘Hard to tell, but there’s writing on it. “Police public call box”.’

There was an uncommonly long silence from the other end. ‘“Police” is an old Earth word for security forces, so it could be someone from the Federation ship.’

‘You mean their equivalent of Adjudicators? They could be here for reconnaissance. Should we try to apprehend them?’

There was an even longer silence. ‘Locate them and escort them back here, as exchange visitors. Just make sure they don’t see anything they shouldn’t, and that they don’t get mangled by you-know-what.’

25

‘If I knew what it was, *it*’d be the one getting mangled. Paxton out.’

He took out the life-form tracker. It was showing three heat traces heading for the transparent wall of the hydroponic vineyard. It still showed no sign of the creature, even though they had followed its visible trail this far. Then again, the trackers had never registered it. He tossed the tracker to Adjudicator Hiller, and she caught it deftly. ‘Take Matthews and go find these three offworlders. Escort them safely back to the Adjudication Lodge: apparently they’re some sort of Adjudicators from Earth, come with the Federation ship.’

‘I thought they hadn’t reached orbit.’

‘They must have sent this pod ahead to scout things out.’

‘Whatever.’ She nodded to the lanky Matthews, and they marched off along the path between the rows of vines. They were lucky, Paxton thought. Despite the perpetual twilight in the vineyards, it was always stiflingly warm, and the blue and gold body armour didn’t help at all.

The overly muscular frame of Hope whirled round suddenly, raising his disruptor to cover the vines below. ‘Did you hear that?’ he hissed.

Paxton had no idea what he was talking about. ‘What?’

‘A noise from in there. Listen.’ Paxton listened. A sound drifted lightly from the distant rows of vines – a cross between a cat’s purr and a hoarse death rattle. ‘What was that?’

‘Well it can’t be an animal, not on this planet. Some of the wood creaking, maybe, or structural settling of the dome?’

There was a long, drawn-out rasping exhalation from somewhere near the transparent roof. They all looked upwards, the lights up there revealing nothing whatsoever. Ross looked around, visibly pale.

‘That was no wall settling – there’s something in here with us.’

‘It’s your imagination,’ Paxton snapped. He had hoped that saying so would make him feel less afraid, but it didn’t; damn Ross and his imagination. With a faint squeaking, one of the lights suspended from the roof swung gently from side to side. Ross’s gun went off instantly, blasting the light in a shower of sparks. The whole lamp crashed into the vines a few yards away. ‘Ceasefire!’ Paxton roared. ‘Wait until you see a tar–’

A shimmering bipedal form slammed into Ross from above, and 26

slashed something sharp and curved clean through his armour and his body in a red spray before leaping through a row of vines. The others immediately opened fire, sending blazing energy into the vines. Soon the whole row, and several patches beyond, were in flames. Paxton paused for breath. Hope and Tipping had spread out, and he doubted that was a good idea.

Even as that thought crossed his mind, a gurgling scream began, and quickly died. He fired off a couple of shots in the direction from which the noise had come. He could see Hope moving some way along the row, and waved for him to approach. Hope signalled an acknowledgement, but, before he had moved two steps, he stopped and looked into a gap in the vines. Something azure and bulky shot

out from the vines, bundling Hope into the growth on the other side.

Paxton backed away, panic-firing into the rows of burning vines, until the touch of a vine against his back made him stop with a yelp.

He looked around, wanting to whimper for someone to come and tell him the others were all right. He couldn't even make his throat do that.

A tendril of vine seemed to writhe around him, lashing out from the row. His vision blurred, and he gasped for breath as something warm and dry pressed itself against his face. It seemed to have four distinct parts, and he realized that they were the fingers of a hand. Belatedly, he tried to raise the disruptor ceilingwards, but four needles of pain lanced into his cheeks and jaw as he felt himself hauled through the vines by an immensely strong arm.

Everything vanished with a flash.

Victoria moved slightly closer to the reassuring form of Jamie, certain that the sound of gunfire would mean trouble. It seemed that the TARDIS never landed them anywhere peaceful and quiet. They had reached an expanse of transparent metal which formed the wall of the vineyard's protective dome, and were making their way along it in search of a door when the noise started.

The Doctor had already taken a few steps back up towards the rows of vines. Victoria had expected that. 'Doctor, let's get away from here,'

she urged.

Jamie nodded. 'She's right, Doctor, we'll probably get blamed for whatever that stramash was – as usual.'

The Doctor looked back uncertainly. 'But people may be injured, and need our help.'

'They won't,' another male voice said from the hillside above. A rangy man with a curly beard and a muscular woman with short hair were looking down on them. Each carried some kind of rifle, and wore royal-blue armour with gold edging and insignia.

The woman looked at a small box she carried. "Demon got them all.' She looked angry, and the man responded with a weary nod.

They came down to join the time travellers, who started to put up their hands. Much to Victoria's surprise, the woman waved them to put their hands back down. They kept their weapons trained on the hillside as they ushered the travellers along the wall. 'Don't worry, we're here to escort you to the city. We found your pod.'

'Pod?' Jamie echoed. 'Ah, ye mean the TARDIS.'

'Yes,' the Doctor said slowly, 'we seem to have had some sort of mishap upon landing.' He coughed before launching on to a new tack. 'This "demon" you mentioned – has there been some kind of trouble here?'

The man grunted. 'You could say that. There's some sort of creature out here.'

'And what does it do, this creature?'

'It kills people, of course.' Victoria felt her eyes drift towards the vines that wrapped the hillside. Anything could be hiding there. . . It wasn't a pleasant thought at all.

'Is it some kind of native to this planet?'

The woman shook her head. 'There was no indigenous life here.

Not so much as a protoplasm.'

'Oh, but then this "demon" of yours must have come from somewhere.' His face fell. 'Oh. . . You, er, you don't think we had anything to do with it?' It was obvious from the Doctor's tone that he, like Victoria, expected that they would think exactly that. As usual.

'Of course not. The tracker device has been monitoring you all along.' She looked back up the vineyard nervously. 'But you could be targets, so the sooner we get you back to the Adjudication Lodge the better.'

Sherwin liked to stand at the flight deck's observation bubble and watch the stars. Out here, though, it was merely depressing blackness.

'Captain,' Lieutenant Clark called from the communications console,

'we're being hailed from Darkheart. A Viscount Gothard.'

'Viscount?' Salamanca asked.

Sherwin tried to recall her history classes. ‘It was the title given to a planetary or colonial governor in the Empire. I don’t see that someone of such rank would have been a part of an SSD squadron, let alone the Imperial Navy.’

‘Perhaps, then, that mission was one of many, of which we have no record of the others. There could be an entire colony here, built up from many convoys.’

‘With that SSD mission sent to keep them in line? You sure you’re not a Scorpio? We’re paranoid too.’ It was possible, she supposed. If this colony was full of important things or people, the Empire might have been concerned about making sure it didn’t secede like the rest of them. ‘Maybe we can ask them. Put him on, Clark. Take the comm, Salamanca.’ She moved towards the small communications annexe that was indented into the port side of the flight deck, then paused.

She quickly took a pair of shoes from a drawer in her desk and pulled them on; it would probably be best to be fairly formal.

Immediately, the life-size form of a weedy man in what had passed for high fashion several centuries earlier materialized in an alcove.

This holographic representation of the Viscount looked at Sherwin haughtily as she stepped into the communications annexe. She nodded a greeting. ‘Viscount,’ she began. She had no idea how one actually addressed the holder of such a rank, and hoped that being polite would get her by. ‘I’m Captain Gillian Sherwin of the Galactic Federation survey ship *Piri Reis*. On behalf of everyone on Earth, please allow me to offer you any assistance you may need after your long 29

separation.’

‘Thank you, Captain. Actually, we are managing quite sufficiently.

However, now that contact has been re-established, I would consider it an honour if your crew and my people could discuss the present state of Galactic affairs.’

‘That was always part of our mission, sir. As an Earth Colony, you are automatically a part of the Federation, and it will be necessary to explain what that entails.’

Gothard’s face clouded. ‘We are citizens of the Empire, Captain.’

He looked away briefly, as if seeking out a cue or prompt. ‘Of course, once we know the state of affairs. . . ’

‘Naturally. It will take you some time to get used to the idea that the Empire has gone: I understand, don’t worry.’

‘As you say. There is one other thing: the safe flight paths approaching Darkheart are quite fickle, given our proximity to the gravitational forces generated by the two stars. We have dispatched a ship to escort you in safely.’

Sherwin had heard that one before, but kept her expression pleasant. ‘Thank you, Viscount Gothard. Your assistance is appreciated.’

He gave a satisfied nod. ‘Then I shall contact you again when you enter orbit.’ His arm stretched out, the hand vanishing as it reached beyond the limit of the holographic transmitter, and he disappeared.

Sherwin let her expression go sour as she exited the annexe, and dumped the shoes back in the drawer. ‘Salamanca, d’you hear all that?’ The Draconian nodded. ‘They’re up to something.’

‘Is this more of your “Scorpio paranoia”?’ She examined the dry green face for any sign: that he was pulling her leg.

‘Observation: he kept looking out of shot for cues from someone else. They’re sending out a welcoming committee. Leave the shields and weapons powered down, but start running some defence drills.

The Empire could be rather. . . touchy, about their territory.’

Seven parsecs from Earth, Fomalhaut burned a clear blue-white. The light reflected smoothly from the unbroken milky clouds that wrapped its second planet. Below this protective layer, huge limbs of organic

material stretched up into the clear atmosphere between the ground mists and the thick clouds. It would be difficult for a human observer to distinguish whether these gnarled gargantua were true plants, or some kind of fungus.

Pack-Mother Brokhyth had been glad to leave, since she was much closer to her family in the tighter confines of the Dragon *Zathakh* than she had been on Veltroch. As with all Veltrochni ships, the crew of the *Zathakh* were all drawn from the same family. Pack Zanchyth was a large family, though, and was spread over many ships across the

Galaxy, as well as still having a few relatives on Veltroch itself.

Now, though, as she saw the cityscape twisting its way across the background to her father's office in the flight deck's main viewer, she felt a twinge of something she barely recognized. Perhaps there was still some part of her that heeded loyalty to territory as well as to the family.

A wrinkled but spry Veltrochni stepped into view, blocking out most of Brokhyth's view of the distant homeworld. His spines were dull and opaque with age. 'My daughter,' he said happily. 'It is good to see you, but I wish it were under happier circumstances.'

Brokhyth's joy at seeing her father again was dulled by that last statement. 'Happier?' She could feel the bad news coming.

Her father looked sorrowful. 'There is great concern here for Pack Huthakh. Their last message home was several weeks ago, and their next message is now some days overdue.'

Brokhyth recalled the

Huthakh as being a small family, certainly no more than half a dozen ships. 'I promised the Council that I would ask you to check up on them, you being the nearest member of a Council family to their last reported position.'

Brokhyth felt her spines rustle agitatedly. 'The entire Pack has vanished?' That was a sickening thought. A whole family line. . .

'They were in only five ships – one Dragon and four transports. I'm sending their last known coordinates, and transcripts of their last few messages, now. I know that if anyone can find them, you will.'

'There will be a great deal of space to cover.'

'Other Dragons are on their way. When they arrive, you will coordi-31

nate the search. Make your mother and me proud of you, daughter.'

'I will.' What else could make her happier? Her father and the panorama of Veltroch faded from the main viewing cube. Brokhyth dropped into the work pit beside Flight Coordinator Koskhoth, who was also her nephew. The coordinates were arriving on his console already. 'These co-ordinates are beyond the Vale of Atroch,' she noted aloud.

‘Yes, in the Outer Darkness.’ Koskhoth sounded a little nervous, but remained dutiful. He passed the data on to the helmsman. ‘Set course for the centre of the area contained in these coordinates. Maximum speed.’ Brokhyth nodded, and stepped back up on to the command balcony; the younger officer had been brought up well. All of this Pack had.

The insectile segmented hull of the Zathakh swung around, its glistening wings folding back into their housings. With a flash of super-charged engine power, it vanished into hyperspace.

The *Piri Reis*’s ventral maintenance airlock was ringed by ten lockers which held the vital environment suits. A strange electromechanical groaning broke the room’s silence, and an eleventh spacesuit locker faded into existence in one corner.

A man in a grey double-breasted suit stepped out and looked around. A cravat with a silver bird-of-prey tiepin was at the collar of his silk shirt. He was of medium build with a high forehead and swept-back hair that was greying at the temples. His neatly trimmed dark beard also had streaks of grey at the comers.

A tall young woman in a comfortable blouse and slacks with knee-length boots followed, relieved that the room smelt only of disinfectant and processed air, without the stale sweat. She had bright and inquisitive eyes above smooth cheeks, and shortish dark hair that was sculpted into curls. ‘This room probably doesn’t get used much,’ she commented.

‘No, I imagine most external repairs are carried out by robots of some kind, fortunately for us. Take this.’ He handed her an identity plaque, and she pinned it to her blouse. He wore a similar one on the 32

breast pocket of his suit.

‘Where to first? The bridge?’

‘No, I think it would be more prudent to assess the general state of the ship and crew first. We should try to find some sort of wardroom or officers’ mess.’

‘On Earth ships, that’s usually quite near the bridge anyway. Certainly on the same deck.’

He nodded. ‘Ah, but you forget, this is a ship built six centuries after your time. Besides, Federation ships won’t necessarily be built by

Earth. The architecture here looks more Terileptil to me; they probably designed and built it for humans.'

She couldn't really tell: a ship was a ship to her. He always seemed to know what he was talking about, though. 'You're the expert.' He was consulting a small electronic personal organizer of some kind.

'What's that?'

'Crew roster. I had time to download and study some details from the ship's personnel files while our identity plaques were processing.'

'That's a stroke of luck.'

'Luck, my dear Ailla, is no substitute for preparation. Always remember that.' He slipped the personal organizer into an inside pocket, and moved to the door. 'Come, let's get in character.' He opened the door to the interior of the ship, and stepped smartly out. Various humans and other beings were wandering in all directions, most with a purposeful gait, but some clearly off-duty ramblers. A couple even went past in sporting kit, jogging round the wide corridors as a source of exercise.

There seemed to be no set uniform for the whole crew each species had its own dress code. Ailla wasn't too surprised – it would be difficult at best to squeeze a Centauran into human-style clothing. Instead, their common affiliations were shown by the single style of rank flashes and identity plaques that everyone aboard wore.

The man walked smartly but with silent grace, while she looked around as if a tourist in a museum. 'You there,' a voice called suddenly.

'Stop.' The bearded man stopped, and Ailla saw a thin, hawk-faced man in a beige uniform marching towards them.

The man raised an eyebrow. 'Is there some problem, Lieutenant Van Meer?'

The officer hesitated, doubtless wondering how this person knew his name. 'Who exactly are you two? I haven't seen yo–'

'I am Koschei, and this is Ailla. We are diplomatic attachés.' He affected an air of being very reasonable about the whole thing.

‘Diplomatic attachés. . . ’ Van Meer echoed fuzzily.

Koschei’s deep-set eyes remained locked on to Van Meer’s. ‘You have sat at our table in the wardroom on several occasions, making small talk.’

Van Meer looked rather lost. ‘Small talk. . . ’

Koschei snapped his fingers. ‘Is there a problem, Lieutenant Van Meer?’

Van Meer shook his head as if he was trying to physically dislodge a thought, then looked back at Koschei and Ailla, ‘Oh, it’s you, Mr Koschei, Miss Ailla. Sorry, I was miles away.’

‘Think nothing of it. I’m sure the excitement of nearing our destination is making everyone a little. . . preoccupied.’

‘Of course.’ Van Meer gave Ailla an embarrassed no and then went on his way.

‘You can’t do that to everyone on board.’ Ailla wasn’t sure how many people were here, but it would be a lot.

‘A simple domino principle: if one or two claim know us, it will be that much easier for the others to accept a suitable excuse for our hitherto non-appearance.’ She supposed that was true, but obviously she still had a lot to learn before she could be as glib about this sort of thing. In her experience, if one wandered into prohibited area, a bribe or violence was usually the only way to avoid being locked up –

or worse. –

Koschei, meanwhile, had stepped across to a screen set into the wall. It seemed to be some sort of map of the ship. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back studying the design intently. ‘The layout is quite elegantly simple, very well ordered,’ he said approvingly.

The flight deck was uppermost at the front, with living quarters running along what would have been the spinal column if the ship was 34

the swan it resembled. The wardroom and other recreational areas were at the centre of the living area. Ailla didn’t doubt that he was memorizing it perfectly – another ability she would love to have. ‘We appear to be somewhere amidships. The wardroom should be nine

decks up and further forward.' He turned and moved off.

Smiling to herself, Ailla followed.

The armoured man who had introduced himself as Matthews led the way along to the vineyard's exit, while the woman, Hiller, kept a rear-guard. Victoria didn't know what was going on here, but she could tell from the way the pair's eyes darted about that they were afraid of something – presumably this demon, whatever it was. 'Doctor, who are these people? Soldiers?'

'No, I think that they're Adjudicators of the Earth Empire. We're more than a thousand years in your future.'

'Adjudicators?' Jamie asked. 'Like judges, or sheriffs?'

'Well, more like policemen, yes. Those uniforms they're wearing are from round about the thirtieth or thirty-first century.'

Victoria was quite surprised when the two Adjudicators finally led them out of the domed vineyard. For one thing, it was almost as cold as it had been in Tibet. Also, it was raining miserably from a fairly cloudless sky. She had never liked rainy weather much, and there was a strange chemical smell to this rain, which was quite unnatural.

The vehicle in which the Adjudicators intended to transport the time travellers to their city was just a rounded lump, like a giant jelly-mould, which had no wheels or wings that Victoria could see. At least in twenty-first-century Australia, the flying machines had had rotating wings like those she had seen imagined by da Vinci. The thing that most caught her attention, though, was the sky itself.

Now that they were out from under the vineyard's protective dome, it was clear that the depth of night here really was black. A strip of distant stars arced across the sky to one side, opposite a large red sun. There were, however, no other stars. 'Will ye look at that,' Jamie breathed. 'It's as if there's no stars left.'

'We're not on Earth, then,' Victoria agreed. Although the Doctor and

Jamie seemed happy to joke about the TARDIS's tendency to bring them to Earth, she didn't feel quite comfortable on different worlds.

The Doctor must be quite brave and strong willed, she thought, to bear it so easily, considering that all those visits to Earth must be just

as alien to him as this was to her.

The Doctor glanced up. ‘No, we’re not. I should say we’re in one of the gaps between the Galaxy’s spiral arms – probably out by the very edge of the Galaxy.’

Hiller stood guard while Matthews opened up a curved section in the side of the vehicle. The interior was pitch-black, with lots of little coloured lights twinkling inside. The Doctor cleared his throat, and gestured to the door. ‘After you, Jamie,’ he said with impeccable politeness.

Victoria relaxed slightly as Jamie climbed in. If the was really any danger, not only would Jamie be able t protect them, but the Doctor himself would have gone in first. The Doctor took her hand to help her in, and she could just about make out that a padded seat circle the inside surface of the wall. Jamie had already move inside, and the Doctor followed Victoria with keen-eye interest.

‘What sort of machine is this?’ Victoria asked.

‘Some sort of flying machine, I suppose,’ Jamie answered.

She wasn’t surprised at his ability to make such a deduction since he had travelled with the Doctor for longer than she had, and had certainly seen far more wonders. ‘I didn’t see any wings, though.’ He reached out to tap curiously on one of the panels of coloured indicators, and the Doctor reached across to slap his hand away.

‘It undoubtedly moves by what most people erroneously call anti-gravity – using the planet’ electromagnetic field to repel it a short distance further away from the core and into the air.’ The Doctor experimented with the switches on the panel as the two armoured Adjudicators entered. As they strapped themselves into seats further forward, the door closed, and lights came on. The cabin was small and cramped,’ with lots of locked doors for equipment or weapons.

‘You’d better strap yourselves in,’ Hiller called back. ‘Just in case.’

The travellers did so, as the vehicle rocked slightly, and Victoria felt

the sensation that it was rising. The Doctor grinned like a schoolboy on a trip, and knelt on the seat to look out of the window. Jamie wasted no time in doing likewise, though a bit more cautiously. They were as bad as each other, Victoria thought, but couldn’t resist the

urge to look over their shoulders herself

The lights of occasional buildings dotted the rain-slicked rock below only infrequently. They were no more than a few yards above the ground, but Victoria could see no trees or hills that would pose a danger. In fact the whole place was oddly flat and featureless. ‘Fascinating,’ the Doctor murmured. Victoria sat back down. A dull flat landscape wasn’t what she would call fascinating.

From inside the transparent dome that covered the vineyard, the flyer could be seen to leave, taking the owners of this strange pod with it.

The vehicle sped off through the darkness, and was soon invisible but for a couple of blinking navigation lights.

The body of Paxton hung amidst the vines a few feet away, his armour having been rent and split as easily as his skin. In the blackness at the centre of his sightless eyes, a reflection flickered, blue with gold trim.

Watched only by the unseeing cadaver that was once Paxton, the hale and hearty figure of a living Paxton walked away, following the flyer’s distant winking lights.

Three

Captain Sherwin was still at lunch when the tabletop intercom chirped. She groaned. ‘What’s up?’

‘I think you had best come to the flight deck, My Lady,’ Salamanca’s voice said. ‘We have company.’

‘Company’ could only mean one thing out here in the wastes beyond Lasty’s Nebula. ‘On my way.’ She started to rise, then paused as she bumped into someone in the process of stepping back from her table.

‘Oh, sorry –’ she turned. A man she didn’t recognize was there, a vision of compressed power with a beard that was greying at the corners.

Somehow, the grey merely served not to age him but give him a hint of steel, as if it were light glinting from the edges. He made a dismissive gesture. ‘Entirely my fault, Captain; my apologies. I was speaking to Ailla here –’ he indicated a tall dark-haired woman beside him’– and wasn’t looking where I was going.’

Sherwin was more concerned with Salamanca's message than whose fault a harmless bump was. Anyway, both had apologized so honour and politeness were satisfied either way. 'Look, it's all right, really, ah –' She squinted at his diplomatic attaché identity plaque.

'Mr Koschei. Think nothing of it.' She paused momentarily. The name wasn't familiar, though they both had valid identity plaques. 'Look, this must sound embarrassing, but I don't really recall seeing you before. . . '

Koschei nodded understandingly. 'We usually get assigned a dinner table with Lieutenant Van Meer, and for the rest of the trip we've been studying the situation and briefing documents in our cabin.'

Sherwin looked at him sceptically. Even with a data hound like Clark, information was so scarce that these two couldn't have spent the last fortnight studying such little – Of course, two of them; and the girl had never been more than eighteen inches from him during this 39

conversation. That was definitely inside what was usually regarded as personal space. She could feel herself reddening slightly at the faux pas. 'Of course. Studying the briefings, right. Well, I'm sure you'll be suitably well prepared and invaluable now that we're reaching our destination. If you'll excuse me, though, I have a call to answer.'

Grabbing a fork, and balancing her plate in her hand, Sherwin left the somewhat bemused-looking Koschei.

Ailla sat down in the seat the captain had just vacated. Koschei sat next to her, and passed her the notebook computer. 'I think some evidence of our meals with Lieutenant Van Meer would be in order –

just in case.'

Ailla took the miniature computer and started searching for the ship's galley records. 'I'm surprised you didn't hypnotize her.'

Koschei tutted softly. 'Suggestion has its uses, but if it is broken, the fact that it was used becomes suspicious in and of itself. However, if someone convinces themselves of your worth voluntarily, then that will merely be strengthened by time.' He pursed his lips. 'Still, for a moment there, I thought I had made a mistake by not doing so. She obviously didn't believe my story about studying the mission documents, yet accepted the story anyway.'

Ailla was suddenly reminded of how different his lack of feeling was

from that of a human. Sometimes she thought she was getting through to him, but then something like this always happened that proved he was still operating on a different level. ‘She thinks we’re lovers.’

Koschei frowned. ‘What a curious notion. What gives her that idea?’

‘That’s a human thing, I’m afraid. She sees a man and a woman who claim to have shut themselves in a cabin for two weeks – what else would they be doing? It’s a natural human reaction for her to assume that your story about study was an attempt to spare my blushes.’

Koschei chuckled amusedly. ‘You know, I could scarcely have *invented* a more subtle or effective ploy.’ He shook his head wonderingly.

* * *

40

Gillian Sherwin hurried along the main hallway to the flight deck.

Even from the rear of the flight deck, she had the impression that the ship outside was very large. It was still quite some distance away, but she could make out the separate sections of its construction, and that meant that it was on a very large scale. Perhaps even as big as the *Piri Reis* itself.

Mei Quan, the slim and lithe Oriental woman with cropped hair at the tactical console, turned as Sherwin came in. ‘Should I raise shields?’

‘Best not. We don’t want them thinking we’re looking for a fight.’

Sherwin wandered on to the observation platform, absently chewing on the occasional forkful. Like the ship in the recording she had seen, this was a cluster of prefabricated mission-specific pods and buildings chained together by a scaffolding of tubular walkways and support struts. All the segments were clad in baroque bas-reliefs, as gargoyles used to swarm over churches on Earth. This ship had a different, though no less revolting, caricature snarl embossed, on the forward section. ‘It’s not the same ship from the Veltrochni logs. Clark, have you got a transponder code?’

‘Decoding now,’ the younger officer replied from the communications station. ‘It’s the Imperial cruiser *Donau*. There’s a voice message along with it: Captain Culver asks that we match velocities and follow his course precisely.’

Sherwin nodded to Salamanca, who immediately turned to relay the instruction to the helmsman. ‘Send my compliments to the captain, and give him an acknowledgement.’

Mei Quan looked up from her console. ‘Sensors say they have operational transmats.’

‘Programme the shields to rise automatically and sound red alert if they try to transmat anyone or anything to or from here.’ Sherwin turned back to the observation port, suppressing a shudder. With the warship so close, she suddenly felt very conscious of the fragility of her ship’s hull as compared with the chaotic forces in the Universe. It was scary, but she would be damned if she’d let it intimidate her as presumably intended.

41

* * *

The Adjudicators’ flyer was over the city before very long. Jamie was quite impressed by the scale of the place, which was much larger than any city of his native era. On the other hand, the sprawl of buildings in concentric circles wasn’t as large as the cities he had seen on his travels.

There were seven rings, with the innermost consisting of towers of metal and glass that stabbed upwards. Thousands of lights sparkled wetly at varying heights, as if the city was a forest of glowworm nests.

The flier was heading towards a curved funnel-like structure, widest at the base, with a jagged rim at the top. It reminded Jamie of Scotland’s brochs – free-standing towers – but on a much larger scale. Unlike a broch, this place was built of mirror-polished metal and glass rather than roughly hewn stones. He nudged the Doctor in the ribs, and pointed at the approaching glass slopes. ‘Hey, will ye look at the size of that thing, Doctor.’

‘Oh my, yes, Jamie, it is a big one. It’s almost a whole arcology.’

‘A what-ology?’

‘Arcology. An architectural ecology.’ Jamie had long since got used to the Doctor’s enthusiasm for giving little lectures on the strangest subjects. ‘There’ll be shafts sunk into the sides at various heights to let in sunlight to parks and gardens on different levels. Or at least there would be on any other planet; I don’t know that they’d bother here. I

don't think they really have a sun.'

How could there not be a sun? That was a daft idea as far as Jamie was concerned. 'There'll be a sun in the daytime, unless this planet moves like Vortis,' he said.

'Oh, I don't think so, Jamie.' The Doctor indicated the dim red orb and its pinpoint companion in the black sky. 'Those are this planet's suns. This is the daytime. Anyway, there appear to be plenty of lights around, and I imagine it'll be quite bright in this Adjudication Lodge of theirs.'

'That's their police station?' Victoria asked.

'Well, yes, or a garrison fortress if you prefer, Jamie.'

'That doesn't look much like a fortress to me,' Jamie opined. 'All 42

those windows would break with a wee stone.'

'That isn't glass, Jamie. I think we'll find that it's some kind of transparent metal.'

'How d'you make metal see-through?'

'You have to alter its molecular structure to change its refractive index.' This explanation didn't mean anything to Jamie, of course.

The flyer passed between two of the sharp crenulations, which they could now see were observation platforms and penthouses. Now it became clear that the Adjudication Lodge was circular, with an open landing field in the centre. The flyer immediately started descending towards one of the numbered landing pads.

Once they had debarked from the flyer, Jamie and the Doctor huddled around Victoria, trying to keep the rain off her. She didn't think it was really necessary – they tended to be a little overprotective towards her, she thought – but it was rather sweet of them. The two imposingly armoured Adjudicators led the time travellers towards a well-lit awning which sheltered a stretch of doors. Behind the doors, a gleaming entrance hall of chrome and crystal was visible, with rooms and corridors leading off. Uniformed figures moved to and fro throughout the rooms.

Under the awning, a man with short blond hair – dark at the roots

– and high cheekbones, with a wide and expressive mouth, was waiting. He wore a royal-blue uniform bedecked with ribbons and medal insignia as well as a somewhat distracting electronic identity card that kept shuffling through a variety of displays. Two men with him – in plainer uniforms – saluted as the arrivals approached. 'Welcome to Darkheart,' he said pleasantly. 'I am Adjudicator Secular Brandauer of the Guild of Adjudicators. I'm sorry if these officers were a little curt with you, but we felt it was safer to get you out of the demon's hunting grounds.'

There was that demon word again. Victoria was glad they hadn't run into whatever it was if it was bad enough to necessitate evacuating them. The Doctor shook the rain out of his coat, and dried off his face with the handkerchief from his breast pocket. 'Oh that's all right, 43

Mr Brandauer. I think you've saved us all a very long walk into the bargain.'

'We'll still have one back the way,' Jamie reminded him.

'Well yes, but it was very kind of these people anyway.'

He

looked back at Brandauer, who was watching the exchange pleasantly enough, but Victoria had the impression that he was memorizing every detail more precisely than most people might. 'This is Victoria.'

She gave a slight curtsey, since Brandauer's uniform clearly marked him as a man of some importance here. 'Jamie –' he nodded'– and I'm the Doctor.'

'Doctor who?'

'Oh, don't you mean Doctor whom? I do hate to be contrary, but. . . '

He coughed a little self-consciously. 'Anyway, I must say it's quite a place you have here.' The Doctor had somehow sidled round the bemused-looking Brandauer, and went through into the entrance hall.

It was floored with marble, or something very like it, and fitted out with glinting statuary and edging. Impressive potted palms were dotted around, and lots of monitor displays and layout diagrams were set into the walls.

Jamie started to follow, but Victoria held him back until Brandauer

motioned them, through. It was more polite that way. Brandauer turned to the two uniformed men. ‘Carry on.’ They nodded and left.

Brandauer moved into a wide corridor. ‘If you’ll follow me. . . We can get you some refreshments and dry you off in here.’ He ushered them into a small reception lounge, which was furnished in a spartan but clearly expensive style. The Doctor immediately offered Victoria a seat. Brandau whispered to Hiller and Matthews, who left, and sat soon as the travellers had settled. ‘Why didn’t you follow the *Donau*’s instructions? Your captain was told that the flight paths in-system are very changeable. You’re lucky you weren’t killed.’

Jamie nodded understandingly. ‘Aye, well our “captain” isn’t exactly –’

‘Isn’t exactly aware of our presence,’ the Doctor cut in hastily. ‘We were on our way here before your ship left to convey its message.’ A thousand years before, Victoria thought, but wisely kept silent. ‘Our

craft encountered some sort of distortion effect, and had a bit of a rough landing.’

Brandauer smiled. ‘Trying to fly between the elements of a semi-detached binary will do that to a ship.’

‘Well, we were just a little curious, that’s all. Patience has never really been my strong point, I’m afraid. You, ah, spoke of a “demon”.

The woman who found us mentioned that too. Is there some sort of trouble here?’

Brandauer’s eyes flicked almost imperceptibly to the door through which Hiller and Matthews had exited, and then he smiled. ‘No trouble. Merely a local nuisance from time to time.’

That was a lie, and Victoria could tell by the look on Jamie’s face that he knew it too. He opened his mouth to speak, but she got there first. ‘Oh, and we’re so grateful. It must be a horrible thing, and I’m glad we didn’t see it.’

‘Quite.

I’ve instructed Adjudicators Hiller and Matthews to arrange quarters for you in the diplomatic wing here in the Adjudication Lodge. They’ll collect you shortly, and I’ll have some food and drink sent in here

while you wait.' He rose, clearly intending to leave.

'By quarters,' the Doctor said slowly, 'I hope you don't mean cells.'

'Goddess, no!' He looked more amused than shocked though. 'The remoteness of this planet from the Emp-Federation, means there are no visitors and, consequently, no hotels. You'll be given a suite in the Admiralty wing, where our starship captains reside when they're on dirtside rotation. That's the closest thing we've got to a diplomatic accommodation wing.'

'Oh, I'm sure that will be wonderful, won't it?'

'A captain's stateroom?' Victoria echoed. 'But of course.'

'Eh?' Jamie asked. 'Oh, aye.' He could be so thoughtless sometimes, but he was always looking out for the other two.

Brandauer nodded. 'Then if you'll excuse me, I'll leave you, and have some refreshments sent in.' He went back out into the entrance hall and disappeared down some other corridor.

As soon as he'd left, Jamie went to the door to make sure he was really gone. The Doctor looked around the polished walls, paying 45

attention to where they met the ceiling. 'I wonder about this demon they're all so nervous about.' Victoria could see a gleam in his eye that was all too familiar. He was getting curious about it. 'They seem very keen for us not to know about it.'

Captain Sherwin was conversing with a typically regal Draconian, who wore a Commander's ID plaque on his robes. They seemed to Ailla to be discussing a flight path that was being displayed in a fair-sized holosphere suspended from the centre of the flight deck's ceiling.

Ailla still couldn't take her eyes off that Imperial cruiser outside.

She had seen the Empire at its height, before meeting Koschei, and it was like a constant reminder of how far she had come. Koschei, meanwhile, had joined Sherwin and the Draconian at the holosphere.

It showed hideously complex flight path dodging between the tidal forces of the two stars.

Koschei tutted sofdy. 'Very tricky. The gravitational dynamics of this system must be one of the most difficult to fly through.'

The two officers looked at him, the Draconian clearly the more puzzled of the two. Captain Sherwin nodded. ‘You could put it that way.’

She clearly saw the Draconian’ puzzlement, and indicated Koschei and Ailla. ‘Koschei and Ailla, diplomatic attachés, meet Commander Salamanca, my First Officer. They’ve been, er, studying for most of the voyage,’ she explained to Salamanca.

Salamanca nodded formally. ‘For a diplomat, you have a quick grasp of astrophysics.’

‘This is merely my current vocation,’ Koschei admitted. ‘My education has been quite extensive.’ He nodded towards the display. ‘This seems a somewhat unusual setting for a colony. Does anyone have any idea why the Empire came here?’

Sherwin shook her head. ‘We were kind of hoping that you could tell us that.’

‘I’m afraid our briefing contained no more information, than yours.’

Less, of course, thought Ailla. ‘Other than in the area of Imperial culture, a subject upon which Ailla has an almost unique expertise.’

Ailla smiled, a little embarrassed. Unique wasn’t the word – there 46

couldn’t be anyone else on board who had been alive at the time of the Empire. No one human, anyway. Koschei walked around the holosphere as he continued. ‘The supernova could have formed terullian deposits on Darkheart, but they could find that in other worlds in the Empire. The gravitational dynamics would produce, massive kinetic energy that could be exploited, but there are a lot of semi-detached binaries in the Galaxy. They can’t have come looking for land suitable for farming. . . ’ Ailla could see that he was getting curious. His lust for knowledge was getting the better of him.

‘Knowledge is power,’ Salamanca hissed. ‘Presumably that is why the Empire kept their reasons secret.’

‘If this planet was discovered by humanity,’ Ailla said, ‘there must have been earlier records. The Empire gained a lot of their knowledge from other races, though – by fair means or foul. Perhaps a race whose territory is nearer here may have some records of what’s so special about this place.’

Sherwin looked at Salamanca. ‘Which is the nearest spacefaring planet to this area?’

‘I will check, My Lady –’

‘Terileptus,’ Koschei said, without looking round. ‘I’m given to understand your chief engineer is a Terileptil, so he may be able to help with a records search.’

Sherwin immediately went over to the flight deck’s communications station. ‘Clark,’ she said to the young man there. ‘Get hold of Ipthiss, and establish contact with Terileptus via hyperlink. See if they have any record of visits to this system.’

‘Right, Captain.’ He left his seat, and a more junior Draconian took over. Sherwin turned to speak, but a look of dismay briefly flashed across her features. Ailla also turned, to see what the problem was. A Centauran with an ID plaque pinned to the fastening of its cloak was filtering the flight deck.

‘Commissioner Epilira,’ Sherwin greeted it. ‘Glad you could join us.’

She sounded sincere, but Ailla suspected that her hastily smothered dismayed look was the more honest opinion.

Commissioner Epilira blinked at Koschei and Ailla; quite an impres-47

sive gesture, coming from a being whose single eye took up most of its head. ‘Excuse me, Captain, but who exactly are these people? I do not believe we have been formally introduced.’ Ailla wondered how they should handle this; somehow she doubted that the Centauran’s huge single eye would make it a suitable object for hypnosis.

Koschei turned from the holosphere with a disarming mille and slight bow. ‘My apologies, Commissioner. I am Koschei, and this is my aide, Ailla.’

Epilira flushed a faint blue tinge. ‘It is strange that I have not seen you before now. I did arrange a social gathering for all the diplomatic crew members; it was very impolite to ignore the request.’

Koschei lowered his head slightly, as if in shame. ‘I must confess, I am a very poor traveller: the jump through hyperspace always makes me feel quite. . . delicate.’ Ailla managed to keep a straight face despite his act. She noticed that Sherwin was also trying to look non-chalant, amused by her misinterpretation of reason for the lie. ‘Fortunately,

now that we are back in real space. . . ' He spread his hands.

'Oh,' Epilira squeaked. 'In that case I understand completely. Space travel can be so unnerving. I've always hated it myself.' Trust a Centauran to respond best hypochondria. 'If you will formally introduce us, Captain. . . ' it instructed.

Sherwin tried hard to look stolid and official – not easy with bare feet and a badly suppressed smile. 'Of course, Commissioner. May I present Koschei and Ailla, diplomatic attachés. Koschei and Ailla, may I present Commissioner Epilira, the ship's protocol officer.'

Koschei gave Epilira a neat half-bow. 'It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.' His voice held no trace irony, though Ailla suspected it was there all the same. He was a good liar.

Epilira's six arms quivered with pleasure. 'I must say does me the world of good to finally meet someone who understands the needs and usages of proper form.' Koschei nodded. 'But of course, one meets so man illiterate barbarians on these planets. . . '

Epilira flushed faintly purple at the thought. 'Oh yes indeed. It is so distressing.' Epilira waved a couple of arms in the direction of the two mismatched suns. 'What duties are you to perform when we arrive?'

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'Oh, I am here simply as an observer – to ensure fair play. Miss Ailla is an expert in Imperial culture and society.'

'Then I am sure we will all be very well informed.'

Koschei smiled. 'Naturally.' Knowledge, as the commander here just said, is power.'

49

Four

The food had, in Victoria's opinion, been surprisingly good. She had taken only a little sip of the wine, but the Doctor and Jamie had both taken a glass or two. Jamie seemed a bit disappointed with it, though, and she supposed – somewhat disapprovingly – that he would have preferred something stronger.

The two Adjudicators who had found them in the vineyard returned

just as they were all finishing up. They had discarded their rather threatening armour, but retained holstered sidearms and royal-blue uniforms. Now they were without the unisex armour, she could see that Hiller was a rather plain girl with dark curls, while Matthews was a lanky man with a face like a prizefighter who didn't win many prizes.

'Are you three all done here?' Hiller asked, a little tiredly, 'The Adjudicator Secular has arranged some quarters for you for tonight.

The *Piri Reis* should be in orbit by morning.'

'Oh yes, let's,' Victoria urged the Doctor. What with the TARDIS's shaking and the long journey here, she was only too happy at the prospect of resting on a nice soft bed.

The Doctor nodded. 'It seems we're all quite ready.'

'This way,' Hiller said, indicating a sort of glass and crystal cloister that encircled the base of the inside of the Adjudication Lodge. The time travellers followed, Matthews bringing up the rear.

'You're from Earth?' Matthews asked, finally displaying some enthusiasm.

'Yes,' the Doctor agreed, 'in a roundabout sort of way.'

Matthews nodded. 'We're all from there – our ancestors, I mean, three hundred years or so back.'

'And you didn't bring any dangerous animals with you?'

'What? Oh, you mean the demon. Grief, no.'

'None of us know what it is,' Hiller said, 'except that it's some kind of invader, since we didn't bring it and there was no indigenous life.

It's been attacking Adjudicators for a few weeks now.'

The Doctor frowned. 'And does it ever attack other colonists, like technicians, or civilian workers?'

'Not that I know of The first we knew about it was when a patrol vanished after setting out to investigate a meteorite impact. We've been trying to catch or kill it, but no luck so far.' The lift doors opened

on to a small atrium decorated with a few plants, from which four arches opened up. ‘This is your suite. Sort out among yourselves which rooms you want.’

‘Oh.’ Matthews snapped his fingers, obviously remembering something. ‘There is to be an Ambassadorial reception tomorrow afternoon. You can be reunited with your captain there.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ the Doctor said happily. ‘I’m sure it will be good fun.’ The two Adjudicators shrugged, and returned to the lift. Victoria went through the nearest archway, and gasped. The suite was quite luxurious, even more so than Salamander’s palace had been on Earth, and he was the power behind half the world. One wall was a curving slope of transparent metal, and the cityscape was spread out beyond it, misted by the rain. The furniture was spotless and filled with deep, soft cushions. The bed was equally comfortable. Objets d’art were scattered around, and another door led off to a sparkling dining area with candlesticks and crystal goblets: It was totally unlike anything she might have expected, given that the building was, in essence, a police station.

She sensed a familiar presence at her shoulder, and turned. Jamie was nodding approvingly at the furnishings, and she glared, not un-kindly, but mentally daring him to say a word about the bed. ‘What?’

he asked plaintively. He did such a good kicked-puppy expression when he wanted to and she tried not to smile.

‘I think we should see what the Doctor thinks. He should get first pick.’

Jamie shrugged. ‘They’re all the same – fit for a king.

Out in the atrium, the Doctor tooted thoughtfully on his recorder, 52

hesitantly stumbling through ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’. ‘Does either of you think it not rather peculiar that only the Adjudicators are being attacked?’

‘What do you mean?’ Victoria asked.

‘Well, if this demon thing were really Just some sort of animal, surely it wouldn’t be so discriminating.

It would attack anyone,

wouldn't it?'

Jamie nodded in agreement. Ye mean it's intelligent enough to know that they're soldiers? They're the ones who are most likely to be a threat to it? It was an interesting thought, but Victoria was mostly glad that this would mean it wasn't likely to attack them.

'Yes, exactly. But if it's intelligent, then why go around attacking people at all?'

'They said it was an Invader, Jamie pointed out. 'Invaders attack.

Simple logic.'

'Simplistic logic,' the Doctor corrected. 'But who says it's an invader?'

Victoria looked at him, mouth agape in genuine astonishment. 'A creature that comes to a peaceful world and starts butchering people isn't likely to be a trade envoy.' That was the behaviour of horrible beasts like the Daleks, who had just as easily butchered her father.

The Doctor patted her hand. 'What I mean is, did it start carving up people before or after the Adjudicators started hunting it?'

Jamie nodded. 'If they attacked it for trespassing, maybe it's just defending itself.'

'Exactly. Not all aliens are out for blood like the Daleks or Cybermen, you know. Even the Ice Warriors were just looking for a home.'

Terrell sipped at a coffee as he listened to the Doctor speak. Didn't the man know his own history, of Earth under constant threat? Hostility and the desire for dominance were a universal constant.

The atrium of the new arrivals' quarters was perfectly reproduced in a small holographic viewing cube on the Adjudicator In Extremis's desk, and, by his moving around the cube, the entire room could be seen.

Terrell hadn't heard opinions like that in a long time. The Sons of Earth and similar groups had propounded such nonsense, ignoring the advances brought to the Galaxy by the Empire. Half the alien ingrates in the home sector owed their continuing existence to the valiance of Earth's forces during the Dalek and Cyber wars.

He switched off the display, having heard enough. This certainly gave

him a better idea about the Federation's nature than did the dry texts pulled from the Veltrochni databanks. Evidently the current Earth government had undone the Empire's work by giving the other powers more of a say in how the Earth and its colonies were governed.

It was odd that the Empire had fallen not to invasion but to economics. The other powers had failed to conquer Earth, so now they bought it instead. It was progress of a sort, and of course the tide of economic warfare could turn just as easily as that of the more direct kind.

The Divine Empress had known even more subtle styles of combat, however, and Terrell was as well versed in them as she could have hoped for. He liked to think, in reflective moments, that she would be proud of him for that. More often he thought about how disappointed and angry she would have been at the mission's disappearance. He would never know, of course.

He would find out a little more about the Empire's last days, he hoped, from the conversations at the reception that Gothard had arranged. He wasn't looking forward to it, as there were always more important responsibilities to be dealt with, but he supposed it might provide some novelty value. Gothard shouldn't have been so quick to agree to it, Terrell felt, but the governor had become somewhat preoccupied with the idea of actually behaving like a true Viscount. As if anybody bothered about such things all the way out here.

Still, his simplicity had its good points. It made his actions more predictable for a start. Doubtless he would be keen to ogle the new arrivals as soon as possible, like a child at a zoo. Terrell stood. Perhaps he could make one more round of his usual patrol before he retired for the evening.

* * *

54

Salamanca was on watch, enjoying the peace of the void, when there was a discreet shuffling behind him. It was Epilira, quivering either excitedly or nervously. Salamanca had never been able to read Alpha Centauri body language very well. 'Is there a problem, Commissioner?'

'I was looking for Captain Sherwin. We still have to arrange a proper briefing on how to behave in the presence of an Imperial Viscount.'

Salamanca could hardly believe his ears. 'Is that all?'

‘All? Is it not important to treat one’s hosts with respect?’ the hexapod asked primly.

‘Of course.’ That was a Draconian tradition too. ‘As the landing party are all from Earth, it is reasonable to assume that they will know how to treat other Earthmen.’

‘Nonetheless, I believe it would be wiser for the captain to allow me to properly brief the landing party. Leaving things to the experience of those untrained in diplomacy just wouldn’t be proper.’

Enough was enough, Salamanca decided. ‘Unfortunately, Captain Sherwin has other duties just now, but I will notify her.’

Gothard couldn’t actually recall the last time he had seen a new face.

In fact, he couldn’t recall whether he had ever seen a new face.

Gothard walked from his Administration building to the Adjudication Lodge. On Earth, a Viscount would have been accompanied by at least four trained bodyguards, but here there was no need. In a way, Gothard was disappointed by that, since he thought it would reflect well on him to be seen as someone important enough to warrant such protection.

As it was, all he had to shelter his skinny frame was a small overhead repulsor field to keep the rain off his quietly fashionable suit.

Adjudicator Secular Brandauer was just leaving the lifts in the Lodge’s reception hall when Gothard entered. Brandauer started in surprise.

‘Sir? What are you doing here?’

Gothard blinked at him with pale blue eyes. ‘I thought that the first visitors to this planet deserved some of my attention.’ Sometimes these Adjudicators seemed to forget his rank, Gothard had noticed.

‘Does Terrell know about this?’

‘I neither know nor care.’ Couldn’t Brandauer see that he was just glad to have the chance to talk to somebody new? No, Gothard reflected, he probably couldn’t. ‘Go and tell him if you like.’ Gothard marched into the nearest lift. When the doors opened again, he found himself in a bright and summery atrium, lit artificially, of course.

Three people were there, on low seats. There was a young man in a kilt and a pretty girl with long dark tresses, who seemed to be sharing a book. If Gothard didn't know better, he'd swear that it looked as if the girl was teaching the lad in the kilt to read. The third occupant was a scruffy little man in a baggy coat, who was fiddling around with some sort of eviscerated electronic device in his lap. 'Excuse me, I'm not interrupting anything am I?'

At once, the scruffy little man dropped the box he was working on and came over to shake hands. 'Of course not! What can I do for you?'

Gothard was taken aback; shouldn't they have saluted or something? Of course, Gothard wore no rank symbols. 'I am Viscount Gothard, governor of the Darkheart colony. I just thought I'd drop by and see how you're all doing.'

The man's face brightened. 'Oh, I see. Oh, do come in. I'm the Doctor, and this is Jamie and Victoria. We're thrilled by your hospitality.'

'It's the least we could do; you're the first visitors to this planet in, what, three hundred and fifty years?'

'Oh, that's quite all right,' the Doctor told him. 'We're quite self-sufficient, you know, but perhaps, while we're here, we could do something for you.'

Gothard doubted it; well, all right, the girl Victoria could certainly do something for him, but. . . 'Such as?'

'I understand you've been having some problems with some sort of creature. A "demon" your Adjudicators called it.'

By the Divine Empress, how much did they know about that? 'It's nothing,' Gothard reassured him smoothly, or so he hoped. 'It's just a bogeyman the Adjudicators use to scare rookies: Something to blame any misfortune on.' Were they believing this? It was hard to tell, since the Doctor had a good poker face, and Victoria just looked puzzled 56

and frightened.

The younger man finally spoke, to Gothard's relief 'Ah, ye mean like a tattie-bogle?'

Gothard was unsure of the meaning of that, but the context seemed clear enough. 'Yes, exactly. This planet was just a lifeless ball of rock when we arrived, and as I said, there have been no visitors here for

three and a half centuries.' Just in time, he recalled that the Federation ship had come in response to the Veltrochni's call. 'Of course, there is the occasional vessel that passes on the fringes of our space, but no one actually comes to visit.'

The Doctor nodded understandingly. 'Yes, well, it's quite out of the way, isn't it? I mean there isn't much out here beyond Lasty's Nebula.

Not without intergalactic drive, anyway.'

'It had its appeals at the time.' This wasn't quite the conversation Gothard had been imagining.

The girl, Victoria, looked surprised. 'But surely if you were looking to expand an Empire, you'd need farmland and mineral wealth.'

Gothard nodded. That was the common-sense wisdom. 'You also need room, and new sources of energy to run things.' Maybe he shouldn't have said that, he thought guiltily.

'And you expected to find those here?' the Doctor asked, immediately serious again.

'Well there's certainly lots of room here.' Damn, but that sounded weak. He turned back to Victoria, hoping to avoid any awkward questions from the Doctor. 'You seem to have a quick grasp of the facts.'

'Where I come from, my people were building a great empire.' She sounded proud, but guiltily so, as if she was ashamed of that pride.

Gothard couldn't understand that. What was wrong with some patriotism?

'Really?' Was Earth expanding again?' That would be joyous news for the whole planet. 'Then that's why you've come here ahead of the main Federation party – to complete the mission.' So, the Empire was expanding? Terrell would be fascinated.

'Actually no,' the Doctor said apologetically. 'We were just passing and had to make something of a forced landing. As I tried to tell that

Mr Brandauer, my friends and I aren't –'

'You weren't sent here for the mission?' It was true that the records

were to have been erased in the name of plausible deniability, but these things had a habit of surviving. Unless, it seemed, there would be no good in their doing so.

'I'm afraid not. We don't even know what your mission was.' Ah, then the records had been erased. That was a pity, because now he couldn't assume that these people were on his side. The girl seemed to be, though, and she was quite sweet too. He smiled at her. 'Why don't I show you around the Adjudication Lodge?'

'That's very kind of you,' Victoria said politely.

Gothard quite liked that politeness. It seemed more fitting to his station somehow. 'Think nothing of it.'

Jamie stood, 'Aye, that might be –'

The Doctor cleared his throat loudly. 'That might be interesting for Victoria, but I've seen many similar things about the place.' He stood, and shook Gothard's hand. 'Jamie and I have some things to do.' He brandished the little box he had been working on. 'You will see that Victoria comes to no harm, won't you?' His voice was light, but his gaze left Gothard in no doubt that he was deadly serious.

'This building is full of Adjudicators, Doctor – she'll be quite safe.

Oh, you will be at the reception tomorrow?' He had almost forgotten about the official welcome for the Federation arrivals.

'Yes, of course,' the Doctor agreed enthusiastically. 'I mean, we can't pass up the chance for a hop, now, can we?'

'No, I suppose not.' These were definitely the strangest people Gothard had met. He offered his hand to help Victoria to her feet.

'I think you'll like it here, Miss. . . ?'

'Waterfield, Victoria Waterfield.'

It was a poetic name. 'Miss Waterfield. While we walk, would you tell me of this expanding Empire?'

Gillian Sherwin was in the conference room, listening to Epilira drone on about how the contact team should be instructed to behave. It wasn't as if this was a first contact situation with some new species 58

which could have totally different values and mores. Salamanca was

looking into space coldly; Mei Quan, Hathaway, Clark and Ailla all looked bored out of their minds; and Koschei had settled into a calm look that worried Sherwin more than anything.

'– and you must also consume certain amounts of socially acceptable poisons,' Epilira was saying. 'Though why your species has developed such expectations is quite beyond me. A primitive test of survival of the fittest, perhaps.'

Sherwin didn't much like the way the Alpha Centauran was referring to humanity, even though she privately agreed with the ideals behind what was being said. 'I have been to formal receptions before, you know.'

'Do you wish me to neglect my duties as protocol officer? I must say, you humans are quite inscrutable at times.'

'No, I don't wish you to neglect your duties. It's just that part of those duties surely includes realizing when a crew member has already got the point.' If Epilira had another offensive reply, it never came, as Ailla came to her rescue.

The girl nodded, her short and sculpted hair bobbing slightly. 'These receptions were a standard practice in the Empire,' Ailla said. 'And still are, on many human worlds. I should be very surprised if there's anyone here who hasn't been to one before.'

'Right then,' Sherwin announced. 'That's the matter settled. Mei Quan, Hathaway, Clark, I'll want you along with me. Find a couple of stewards we can rely upon to come along as well, Mei Quan.'

'Of course.'

'Then I suggest we all get some rest; it's going to be a long day tomorrow.' As one, the occupants of the conference lounge stood, making towards the door. Sherwin herself was just about to leave for the flight deck when Koschei stayed her with a hand on her shoulder.

'If I may speak with you for a moment, Captain?' Ailla stood by him, giving her an apologetic smile. 'I was thinking about your choice of guests for this reception, and wondered if I might make one small suggestion.'

Sherwin raised an eyebrow. 'Time to earn your pay?' It couldn't 59

hurt to listen; he was supposed to be a diplomatic attache, and so

should be more attuned to this sort of thing than she was.

Koschei nodded. ‘It might be wiser if Ailla were to accompany your party. Ailla is, shall we say, something of an expert on the Empire. I know she is supposed to be here as more of an adviser, but you may find her insight and knowledge useful.’

Koschei’s suggestion did have merit, and he had made it so reasonably that it was difficult to refuse, though Sherwin was beginning to get the feeling that he had cultivated this persona for exactly that purpose. ‘I don’t see any reason why Ailla shouldn’t be on the team.’ She grinned, excited at the prospect of the trip. ‘I’d want to go if I was you.’

Commissioner Epilira hurried through the corridors of the *Piri Reis* as fast as its leg would carry it, in pursuit of Captain Sherwin. The landing party was due to leave soon, and it was up to the tireless Epilira to make sure that they were properly aware of the need for discretion. After all, these humans were an uncomfortably barbaric species, and it just wouldn’t do to upset them.

Peace by mutual understanding was the order of the day, or would be if Epilira could ever fathom out what it was that drove humanoids to indulge in lifestyles that were clearly dangerous. Why, just the other day, Epilira had seen several crewmen indulging in a poker game. Had they no idea of the stress they were subjecting themselves to, let alone the ill effects of the mutual hostility that was generated by such an activity?

It was like watching those Earth animals – what were they called?

Lemmings. Some of them even indulged in space travel for some sort of perverse pleasure, even when the travel wasn’t absolutely essential.

Epilira couldn’t understand that for a moment.

Captain Sherwin was talking to Surgeon Hathaway when Epilira reached the cradle of the executive shuttle. The *Piri Reis*’s hangar deck was a long rectangular hallway full of retractable walkways that cocooned the cradles for numerous smaller ships. Huge airlock hatches separated the preparation area here from the vacuum of the actual 60

docking bay itself. The docking bay was simply a long channel running from stem to stem through the lowermost deck, and was open fore and aft for ships to leave or enter. The mechanical cradles would lift the ships into or out of the airlocks to transfer them between the hangar and the docking bay. Various maintenance robots were

scuttling around the shuttle like metallic insects, and just as revolting.

‘Captain,’ Epilira called out, waving a couple of arms to attract her attention. The hexapod skirted round another maintenance robot and joined the two humans. ‘Commissioner,’ she acknowledged. Hathaway gave a polite nod. They were both in cream and gold dress uniform. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘I was concerned at your intent to join the landing party,’ Epilira trilled. ‘Should you not remain on board in case of some emergency?’

Sherwin gazed coolly into the eye. ‘On Earth, sending a subordinate to an official reception would be construed as a calculated insult. Of course, if you think an insult would be the best way to –’

‘Certainly not! What do you take me for?’ Epilira flushed a faint blue, and ruffled its arms. ‘I am merely concerned for the safety of ship and crew.’

‘So am I, Commissioner, you can rely on that. If you’ll excuse me. . . ’

Ailla had arrived, with Clark, Mei Quan and a couple of stewards.

‘Now that we’re all here,’ Sherwin said pointedly, ‘we can start the trip. As you know, they’re holding some sort of diplomatic reception for us, but be careful what you say. I don’t want to instil any culture shock. Apart from that, it’s all standard rules.’

Ailla looked towards the shuttle, while Epilira was privately af-fronted at being sidelined. ‘Is this your first diplomatic visit?’ Mei Quan asked her, in a melodious accent.

‘Yes it is,’ Ailla confessed.

Mei Quan nodded. ‘Then there are some things you may wish to be careful of. Be very wary of what you drink. Only eat from a buffet the locals are taking from, and don’t go to bed with any of them.’

‘I hadn’t planned to.’

‘It’s what *they* plan that counts. They will be keen for new information, and probably won’t be too concerned how they charm it out of 61

you – within reason.’ Epilira was disappointed, but what could one expect from a species who had – and the thought was so disgusting –

to share reproduction. Epilira watched in a somewhat stunned silence as they boarded the shuttle. Humanoid behaviour was just so bizarre.

Ailla was quite looking forward to the trip. She was curious to see how it would compare to her usual mode of travel. She fumbled uncertainly with the safety straps, and Mei Quan reached across to check them for her. ‘Thanks.’

‘That’s OK.’ Her almond eyes sparkled lightly. There was a sudden thud that vibrated through the ship, and the shuttle dropped from the Piri Reis’s hangar bay, its wings immediately swinging into position for atmospheric flight. Ailla’s stomach was left behind as they dropped, and she definitely envied Koschei’s more comfortable mode of transport.

Five

Terrell was in the Naval flight coordination centre. It was a long building, with rows of screens and consoles along two opposite walls. From here, all ships in orbit could be monitored and given instructions, in order to best use their resources, and avoid collisions.

Terrell had long since settled into a daily routine, of which a visit here was always the first part. Normally it was purely out of habit, of course, but today he wanted to see which orbit the Federation ship had entered. It didn’t really matter, since he trusted the Navy captains to take any situation into account, but he liked to know what was what from a first-hand perspective.

He noticed that the coordinators hadn’t let them into geostationary orbit, which was probably for the best. He was just wondering where the nearest Imperial craft was, now that the *Donau* had returned to her patrol station, when Brandauer came in.

Terrell was surprised to see him: the high-cheeked Adjudicator was always so wrapped up in the day-to-day running of the Lodge that he rarely left the building. Whatever his reason for coming here, it must be urgent and serious. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Something very odd just happened.’

‘Odd? In what way?’

‘Odd’ occurrences usually meant that something was amiss, and

Terrell didn't like problems.

Brandauer shifted uneasily. 'It's those three Federation scouts that were brought in. . .

The security system has spat out a match for them.'

'That's impossible.' The security computers were programmed to refer all input from the security cameras to the database of known criminal offenders. Nobody had bothered to remove that subroutine from the computers since the colony was established. The computers 63

had been updated with time, as the colony's science progressed, but the database was more than a quarter of a millennium out of date.

The only way anyone could be registered in the files was to have been around three hundred years ago.

'It's in one of the newest files from just before we left.' Brandauer called up a sequence of images in a hand-held viewer, and passed it to Terrell. 'These logs are from the Britannicus Ice Base on Earth.

Apparently there was some sort of trouble with a group of Martian warriors. You can see that these are the same three people.'

Terrell certainly could see that, though he couldn't think how it was possible. 'The three that are here – they couldn't be clones of those people, or android doubles?'

'Anything's possible. They could be androids, or maybe time travellers – we know the Daleks can travel in time, so why not others? Or there could be a different answer.' Brandauer switched off the image and lowered his voice, so as, Terrell assumed, not to alarm the Navy personnel. 'Such as another Darkheart, perhaps?'

'That's impossible.' Even this planet had only been tracked down working from the vaguest legends. 'If there had been a more accessible facility elsewhere, it wouldn't have taken so long to find.'

'How can we be sure? Whoever built it probably wasn't native to this rock, so there could be others, or at least other relics of their technology, elsewhere.'

'If there had been any such discoveries in Imperial territory or Draconian space, or even Dalek space, I would have heard of it. In any case, even if they did have access to such a thing, then why come

poking around ours?'

'To keep the secret to themselves, of course.' Terrell considered this.

Brandauer had a point there: maintaining superiority in technology was an important part of keeping control. 'There are three possibilities, as I see it. These people are either androids, know of another Darkheart, or can somehow travel in time. I want to know which it is by midnight.'

'You want me to see what I can wheedle out of the Federation captain at the reception?'

'No!' Brandauer was good and loyal, Terrell was sure, but not very well versed in subtleties. 'We don't want her to know that we have any suspicions about these people, do we?'

'I suppose not.'

. 'Keep them under surveillance, and make sure everything they say and do is recorded – especially when they're reunited with their captain.'

'Consider it done.'

Victoria had had the quartermaster computer system deliver a ball gown that wasn't quite as restrictive as those in her own era, but was nonetheless quite reminiscent of them. She had become quite used to wearing more comfortable clothes, but in the case of a formal reception, she felt that she ought to be at her best.

Jamie had managed to acquire a rather dashing full Highland dress, but the Doctor had determinedly retained his original clothes. 'Now then,' he said, 'are we all ready?' He was almost rubbing his hands with glee.

'I'm ready,' Jamie said cheerily.

'So am I,' Victoria agreed. 'But, Doctor, you really should wear something more suitable.'

'Oh but I am. Suitable for me, that is. Clothes don't make the man, now do they?' He was interrupted by a strident beeping from somewhere in the darkest recesses of his old frock coat. The Doctor

took out the little black box from his pocket. It was the source of the beeping, and the lamp on it was flashing wildly. ‘It’s the time path indicator again; another time machine is on the move in this vicinity.’

Jamie unconsciously checked that his skean dhu was in its place in his sock. ‘Doctor, you said in the TARDIS that –’

‘Now, I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.’ He didn’t look even remotely convincing this time. Victoria wondered what was so worrying, that both men were looking at her with such concern.

‘What is it? Well, one of you tell me, please.’

Jamie reddened slightly, looking embarrassed at having kept things from her. The Doctor said that the last time thon’ wee box started 65

beeping, it was because the Daleks were following him.’

Victoria suddenly felt very cold. She had tried to block the Daleks from her mind for all of the time that she had travelled with the Doctor. Sometimes, when they crept up on her in her dreams, she awoke, knowing that she had to try to forget them if she was going to stay sane. They had killed her father, and tom the last of her childhood from her. That made her angry, but not half as angry as the fact that the Doctor and Jamie had known this all along and not told her. She wasn’t a child any more, and protectiveness could go too far. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she demanded.

The Doctor glared briefly at Jamie. ‘I thought it would upset you if I said anything.’ He took on a shamefaced look. ‘Also, well, I’m now certain that this is not a Dalek time machine.’

‘It isn’t?’ She wasn’t sure whether to be relieved, or stay angry at his having misled her.

‘No. I suspect it’s another TARDIS.’

That was unexpected. It hadn’t really occurred to Victoria that there was more than one TARDIS. She had always assumed that it was somehow unique. ‘How could it be? Who else could have a TARDIS?’

‘One of my own people.’

If anyone had been counting the Adjudication Lodge flyers parked in the dispersal area around the landing pads, they would have discovered one more vehicle than the colony actually owned. Koschei

stepped smartly from the flyer, and turned on his heels to make a quick survey of the surroundings.

He now wore the dress uniform of an Adjudicator of the thirty-first century, such a dark midnight-blue that it could easily be taken for the inky hue of a blackbird. So disguised, he was scarcely going to risk attracting attention by mountaineering around the exterior of the Adjudication Lodge like some common criminal. Instead, he marched straight up to the front door.

A desk sergeant started to rise as he entered, but Koschei waved him to sit back down at his terminal. 'That's all right, Sergeant.' He turned, as if to continue into the building – though he really had no 66

intention of doing so yet – and then paused. 'Oh, er, there is one thing. Do you happen to know if Viscount Gothard is in his office at the moment?'

'No, sir, he left some time ago to prepare for the reception for the Federation ship's captain.' The sergeant frowned, clearly trying to work through some tortuous problem in his mind. 'Sir, I haven't seen you before. . . '

'Indeed not, Sergeant.' He smiled, looking the sergeant right in the eye. 'You have not seen me now. You have seen no one since Viscount Gothard left.'

'I have seen no one since Viscount Gothard left.'

'Very good.' Koschei noticed the monitors arrayed before the desk sergeant, which undoubtedly displayed security images of the interior of the building. 'You cannot see me,' Koschei continued, 'and will not see me on the monitors.'

'I will not see you on the monitors.'

'Good work, Sergeant,' Koschei said ironically, then turned and went towards the lifts.

Terrell and Gothard emerged on to the roof of the city's Civil Administration building, which was adjacent to the Adjudication Lodge. In fact, the squat octagonal tower that was the Administration building was almost an annexe to the Lodge, connected to it by a number of covered bridges and walkways. Off to the left was the razor-edged spear of the executive tower, connected to both the other buildings in the same manner, as it was where most of the high-

ranking officials from both of them actually lived. Together the three buildings formed something of a central triangle at the very heart of the city.

A couple of apparent stars that were alone in the sky flashed steadily as they grew larger. In a matter of moments, they had resolved themselves into the running and' navigation lights of an executive shuttle.

Terrell nodded silently to Vacano, the heavyset engineer who, with his scruffy goatee and sunken eyes, looked more like a nineteenth-century intellectual than anything else. Vacano promptly turned on the landing lights around the rooftop landing pad.

Caught in the lights, the triangular shuttle was as pale as a bird's ghost. Its wings folded neatly away so that it could balance on repul-sorlift fields for touchdown. Gothard and Terrell walked forward to greet the new arrivals as a ramp lowered from the shuttle. Terrell felt vaguely uncomfortable playing this role, but he noticed that Gothard was lapping it up, almost quivering with pride at being able to show off

Terrell simply stood with him, hands behind his back, admittedly curious about what the occupants of the shuttle would be like. The first person to descend from the shuttle was a short and attractive woman with long black hair carefully tied back. Gothard gave a slight bow from the neck as she approached. 'Captain Sherwin,' he said, 'I'm so glad to finally meet you in person. Welcome to Darkheart.'

She smiled broadly. 'Thank you, Viscount. It's nice to be here.' She half turned indicating the others who were filing down the ramp. 'Allow me to introduce my senior staff, or at least those not busy on duty.'

She indicated a fresh-faced young man with sandy hair. 'Lieutenant Clark, my communications officer.' The next was an oriental woman with cropped hair above her delicate features. 'This is Mei Quan, my tactical adviser and military attache.' Gothard nodded to them in turn as Sherwin continued on to an olive-skinned man with black hair and a very Latin look. 'This is Surgeon Hathaway, chief medical officer.'

She nodded to the last of the newcomers, a girl in civilian slacks and waistcoat. 'And this is Ailla, a diplomatic attache.'

Terrell couldn't resist a wan smile at that. Three hundred and odd years on, and they were still calling spies 'diplomatic attaches'. The girl seemed to notice his expression, and gave what looked to Terrell like an apologetic shrug. She knew it too, he realized. Perhaps there was hope for humanity yet, if they hadn't lost that Imperial guile.

Gothard shook each of their hands in turn, then presented them towards Terrell. 'This is Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell. He is the highest-ranking security service officer on the planet.' Ailla's brow furrowed slightly.

Terrell nodded. 'I imagine things have changed somewhat on Earth in the past three hundred and fifty years – even in the Adjudication 68

service, if there still is one.'

Sherwin hesitated, then her face cleared. 'Now they call them Arbiters, but it's more of a judicial than police service, like when the Guild of Adjudicators was first founded.' Terrell nodded politely. Trying to converse this way was a pain, and it was much easier to just demand answers. He couldn't do that right now, and knew it.

Gothard stepped in smoothly, 'If you'd care to accompany me, we have a reception prepared in the main public discussion hall downstairs.'

Sherwin nodded, and Gothard led the Federation visitors towards the doors that led inside. Ailla paused a moment, looking around at the Adjudicators with a calculating expression, then followed after the others.

The public discussion hall was a huge open room with a very high ceiling. Murals and bas-reliefs of important events in Imperial history alternated on the walls with lit panels that glowed with a soft warmth.

The room was packed with people, at least a couple of hundred.

About half of them were in crisp Adjudicators' dress uniforms, and half the remainder were in Imperial Navy uniforms. The rest were in a wide variety of flashy civilian suits and dresses.

Victoria gave a little gasp of pleasure as she saw the thronging mass.

'it's just like a ball at home.'

Jamie was less impressed. There didn't seem to be any music, and

nobody was dancing. It doesn't seem like much of a ceilidh to me.'

'It's only just beginning. People will circulate and talk.' The Doctor nodded in agreement, and helped himself to a handful of vol-au-vents from the top of a serving robot that was passing the door. 'The fashion for these things goes it: cycles, Jamie, and right now it seems that wilder carousing is out of fashion. He made a faintly sad face. 'I suppose you've got a point, though. . . There isn't much good holding a party if there isn't going to be a good knees-up with it.'

Jamie grinned, pleased at this backup from the Doctor. 'There, what did I tell ye?'

'Doctor! Miss Waterfield!' It was Gothard, winding his way through 69

the chattering crowd, and flushed with excitement. 'I'm glad you could make it. Something gave Jamie the impression that Gothard wasn't talking to him or the Doctor. I have a surprise for you.

Jamie couldn't imagine what sort of surprise Gothard could have for them, but the Doctor was already following him back through the crowd. They came to a man in a very well-decorated Adjudicators uniform, who was talking with a long-haired woman in a cream and gold uniform. Jamie had no idea who it was, but the Doctor had no hesitation in taking her hand enthusiastically. 'Captain Sherwin, I presume?'

'Yes, and it seems you have the advantage of me.'

'Oh no not at all. Viscount Gothard here said they were expecting a Captain Sherwin, and that isn't an Imperial uniform. I'm the Doctor, and this is Jamie –' Jamie shook her hand with a nervous grin'– and Victoria.'

'Pleased to meet you. What ranks do you hold here?'

'Ah well we're visitors to the colony as well.'

Gothard and the high-ranking Adjudicator exchanged puzzled glances, then Gothard turned back to the Doctor. 'Are you trying to say you're not members of the same crew?'

The Doctor gave him a long-suffering look. 'Well I did try to tell you, but nobody would listen to us. Our ship ran into some interference and we had to make a. . . a forced landing.'

‘Captain, your ship is the only –’

She shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, Viscount Gothard, but I’ve never seen those people before in my life. They’re not members of my crew.’

The Doctor stood beside her, there wasn’t much difference in height between them. ‘As I said, I tried to explain to the people here that we were just lost travellers, but they seem to have got this idea stuck in their heads. I’m sorry if it’s inconveniencing you.’

‘It’s no problem. Viscount, the only civilians aboard my ship are Commissioner Epilira, my protocol officer, and Koschei and Ailla, the diplomatic attaches.’

Jamie saw the Doctor pale slightly, and wondered what had upset him. Gothard started to speak, but the high-ranking Adjudicator with

the thinning hair and solid face stepped forward. ‘My apologies to both of you, then. Your pod is so small, Doctor, that we didn’t think it was capable of independent travel.’

‘It has its moments,’ the Doctor said vaguely.

‘We’ll have it brought back to the city for you. Accept our hospitality until it can be recovered, and please, enjoy the reception. It is a double pleasure to greet two sets of visitors from Earth.’ Jamie didn’t believe a word of it. He seemed about as trustworthy as an English politician. Even that oily Gothard was preferable, since at least you knew where you stood with him.

‘I’m sure we will,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘Come along, Jamie, we don’t want to intrude on the captain’s conversation, and I’m sure there are lots more people who’d like to see a new face.’

Jamie was confused. Why hadn’t Gothard or the other man done something about the fact that they were intruders of a sort? There was something odd going on here. The Doctor escorted him away. ‘I don’t like the sound of this. There’s something sleekit about that other man.’

‘Yes, Jamie, he does seem a bit too good to be true. You’d think he would at least ask what we were doing here.’

‘He’s up to something.’ That much seemed obvious to Jamie.

‘I’m sure he is, but right now there isn’t much we can do about it.

Besides, I want to have a good old think about things here. There's something. I should be aware of, but I just can't quite see what it is.'

The Doctor sounded quite put out at that.

Jamie suspected the Doctor needed reassuring. Och, nobody can know everything.'

'No, and it's an awful nuisance, isn't it?'

Gillian Sherwin watched the two strange men disappear back into the crowd, and wondered who they were. It didn't matter, she supposed.

'What do you know!' she said to Gothard. 'You wait three and a half centuries for a ship from Earth and then two come along at once.'

'What? Oh, yes.' He seemed to pull himself together. 'This Federation of yours is ruled from Earth, of course?'

'No, it's a mutually cooperative society. Originally it started to provide a stable market to help rebuild the Galaxy's economies after the collapse of the Empire. Thousands of worlds all had their own local systems and currencies, and on some planets you could exchange half a ton of platinum for a crate of foodstuffs. Right now, they're building a central capitol on Io, which they claim will be open for business within a couple of years, but I'll believe that when I see it.'

'Then the other powers have a say in Federation policy?' Terrell asked.

'Equally with us, yes.' She knew this must sound strange to Imperial ears. 'Each member takes the chairmanship for a fixed term, but even within that term, all members have to agree on anything that is to become law.'

'Unanimously or by majority?'

'Majority.' She regretted it as soon as she said it, suddenly realizing where Terrell was taking this conversation.

'And, of course, the majority of members wouldn't be too fond of the Empire which used to rule them.'

'There have been a lot of empires, and a lot of human dominions and colonies have become separate members.' She nodded to Gothard. 'That's what would probably be best for this place.'

'Such things aren't in my purview,' Terrell said. 'I should be getting along.' He left without waiting for Sherwin to utter any formalities.

Gothard coughed discreetly. ‘And what does such membership entail?’

‘Well, subsidies for one thing, though once you’re a full member, you’d have to pay from profitable. . . ’

Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell beckoned Vacano over, and stepped out of the discussion hall. ‘Sir?’ Vacano acknowledged.

‘Have a lifter sent over to the vineyard, and tell them to bring back the pod the Doctor and his friends came in. Also, remind Brandauer to have them put under constant surveillance. They may know more about us than it seems, so I want their movements tracked carefully.’

Vacano nodded. ‘There is something else, sir. I think we have some-72

thing. I’ve been experimenting with the pieces of the quantum lance recovered from that Veltrochni ship, and the Darkheart linkages are showing a definite sympathetic vibration.’

‘You mean they’re compatible technologies?’ Veltroch had been inhabited for longer than most worlds, but he hadn’t even imagined that they might have been contemporaries of the unknown race whose minds he had been trying to analyse for so long.

‘No, but it gave me a line to go on. I think I can alter the Darkheart’s settings, with some degree of success, by diverting the control signals through the lance’s focusing crystal.’

That sounded better than nothing, but was too vague for Terrell’s liking. ‘How much of a degree is some?’

‘Enough to perform simple tasks, such as picking rough directions.

We won’t be able to change its current function, or –’

‘Work up a plan to incorporate this new find into the control consoles, and I’ll be down later tonight.’ Perhaps the evening would provide some entertainment after all.

‘Is anything wrong?’ another voice asked? Terrell turned to find Gothard joining him. ‘Why did you let them go like that?’

‘I don’t want to alert them, or Captain Sherwin, to our suspicions.’

‘Sherwin? But they’re not part of her crew. That’s the whole point.’

Terrell tutted softly. Gothard was a civil servant, and so Terrell wasn’t

surprised that he didn't have the cunning necessary for security.

'We have only their word for that. Let us imagine a hypothesis, that Captain Sherwin didn't expect to be met so early by the *Donau*, so she sends off these three spies in a pod, assuming that we will greet them with delight, unaware of the nearby Federation ship. Then they pretend not to know each other. As it is we know of their approach before the pod arrives, and so they now try to pretend that we had jumped to the wrong conclusion, again claiming not to know each other.'

'If they're spies, why did you let them go?'

'If their pod can really transport them so far, it must have a greatly advanced technology, and that is something the Empire will find useful.'

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* * *

A pretty young girl in a floor-length dress was standing, bemused, in the midst of a cluster of conversational groups. Ailla looked at her closely, feeling that there was something odd in the way she carried herself She didn't move quite like the Imperials, and Ailla quickly realized that it was because the Imperial residents were accustomed to local gravity. This girl must be a visitor too. She looked very alone, despite the crowd, and Ailla felt vaguely sorry for her. 'You seem unhappy.'

The girl nodded, then sighed. 'The Doctor and Jamie seem to be having all the fun as usual.'

'Doctor. . . ?'

'Just the Doctor. That's all he calls himself.'

'The Doctor?' Ailla nodded knowingly. 'Now that's a name I haven't heard in a long time.'

The girl looked surprised. 'You know him?'

Ailla grimaced. 'Well, I've –' She was interrupted by Gothard.

'We've not had the pleasure, yet, have we?' he asked. 'No, I don't think so.' And nor would he, as far as she was concerned. She looked

round, but the girl had disappeared into the crowd. Resigning herself, she turned back to Gothard.

No one was around, which suited Koschei fine. What he needed was the central observation room, where all the city's sensor inputs and security scans would be monitored. There he could get a good look through the city without having to take all day to walk through it.

He found it at the heart of the Adjudication Lodge, set into an inner ring of the circular building. There was only a skeleton staff on duty in the room, which was crowded with consoles and holographic displays.

He had removed most of the decorations – which had so impressed the desk sergeant – from his uniform, and as a result nobody paid him any attention as he came in.

The centre of the operations room contained a large holographic display of the city, with cursors and symbols moving to mark out the positions of vehicles. Koschei noted with interest that the city was 74

essentially shaped like a figure 8, or perhaps an infinity symbol. One half had the triangle of Adjudication Lodge, executive tower, and Administration complex at the centre. A long building between the two halves was labelled as the Naval flight coordination gallery, but the centre of the other half of the city was left blank, as if there was nothing there.

Making sure that none of the other duty officers were suspicious of him, Koschei moved to a monitoring station, and began searching through the city's sensors. A title bar gave various bits of esoteric information that was probably useful to the proper authorities, but all Koschei was interested in was what and where each location being monitored was.

Most of the images he flicked through were of typical Imperial installations: a spaceport, repair shops, residential areas and so forth.

After a few minutes, however, the display turned solid black. 'Intriguing. . . ' The title bar said the monitor was one of a couple of dozen overseeing 'The Darkheart'. Words swam up into the black display:

'Access restricted. Enter security override code, or select another region.'

Koschei was tempted; anything hidden must be worth a look, but the other Adjudicators in the room would surely become suspicious, and

he didn't want to be pushed into any overt actions yet. Perhaps Ailla could make something of it, if they could find a security code.

He selected a different area, and started ploughing through yet more images.

The Doctor had somehow got into an incomprehensible conversation with a group of Imperial scientists. Jamie couldn't follow a word of it, but picked up the general idea that they were talking about the two suns, if you could call them that.

Still, at least it gave him the chance to sample the local delicacies, and make a mental note of where all the armed Adjudicators were around the room. He noticed Victoria talking to the pretty girl from the Federation, and was glad when she discreetly made her way back once Gothard interrupted. He had thought she would be easy to keep 75

track of, but the fashions and dress here were such an eclectic mixture that hers was not the only Victorian-era dress in the room.

Regency-style mixed with clothes made of some sort of plastic, and all manner of other attire. For once, it seemed the travellers didn't look out of place, because everyone in civilian dress looked equally out of place.

Victoria reached him, looking a little sad. 'Aren't ye enjoying yourself?'

'Not really, Jamie. It's all a little over my head, I think.'

Jamie nodded, understanding completely. 'Maybe it'll get better later.'

'Perhaps,' she admitted, 'but I think I shall go back to our rooms before very long. It's been a very tiring day.'

'Aye, it has that. D'ye want me to walk you back?' Jamie was tom somewhat. He would feel safer if she were looked after, but then that would mean leaving the Doctor to get himself into trouble.

'No, no. You'd better stay and look after the Doctor. I'm sure I'll be fine, and it's only a short walk anyway. And the Doctor did say these Adjudicators were all policemen.'

Ailla made her way over to the captain. Sherwin seemed to notice the look on her face. 'Is something wrong?'

‘No, not at all. It’s just not what I expected.’

‘Life is always different from the way books say it is.’ Who was talking about books? Ailla wondered. If only she could have said so.

‘I always thought a Viscount ruled a colony, but I’d swear that Gothard is being manipulated by that Adjudicator In Extremis.’

Ailla nodded. ‘I’d noticed that; it was one of the things I hadn’t expected.’ Ailla wished she could do something really useful to explain her feelings, like create a telepathic link to share memories. Unfortunately, such things were impossible for humans. ‘What I’m trying to say is that everything here seems. . . I don’t know, askew somehow.

Like all these Adjudicators. Adjudicators were relatively rare in the Empire, compared to the rest of the population.’

‘This does seem to be a high-security area.’

‘Yes, but that’s not what Adjudicators were for. This sort of security was provided by Landsknechte or Naval troops. The Guild of Adjudicators were an organization who demanded great wisdom and intelligence for detective work and judicial arbitration. They did have powers allowing them to begin and engage in combat, but they weren’t an army of jackbooted stormtroopers. But here. . . It’s like being in a bad Imperial holovid, where no matter how many alien infiltrators are around, there are always more guards waiting to join the fray.’

Sherwin nodded. ‘This does have all the trappings of a military dictatorship.’

‘That’s it. That’s exactly it. The Empire wasn’t a military dictatorship: it was a huge lumbering bureaucracy with almost as many civil servants as civilians. This place has retained all the symbols of the Empire – the ships, Adjudicators and what have you – but it has all become skewed.’

Sherwin shrugged. ‘Any society is bound to evolve some differences in three and a half centuries.’

‘Yes, but it doesn’t feel that way. It just seems. . . ’ She gave up with a grimace. It just didn’t feel like a result of societal evolution.

‘It’s probably nothing.’ Sherwin nodded, and was almost immediately accosted by an Imperial offering small talk. Ailla turned towards the buffet table, and was surprised to see Koschei on the far side of it. She moved beside him. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘Not exactly.’ He made a so-so gesture. ‘There’s something I need you to do for me.’

Six

The trek across the distance from the domed vineyard and fields had been a depressing affair, but necessary. The landscape consisted entirely of cold wet rock of some kind, with no other features or vegetation. Although the ground was uneven, there hadn’t been a single hill or valley, just the unending plain.

At least the uninspiring landscape meant that it was easy to locate the city. The constant clouds of drizzle glowed faintly with reflected and refracted light from the complexes there, forming an expansive beacon on the drab horizon.

The outermost buildings were all industrial storage facilities, and so were not worth a visit. The trio from the capsule would have been taken nearer the heart of the settlement, that much was obvious.

Whether they were guests or prisoners, they would be close enough for greater security to be easily assigned.

The few people around in the dilapidated industrial sector looked on curiously, but didn’t question the blue-armoured form. There were no other such armoured figures around, so perhaps they didn’t patrol here, or at least not often.

It didn’t matter; the people clearly assumed that what they were seeing was what was walking among them. That was good. That meant there was no need to kill them.

Not far from the imposing Adjudication Lodge, a knife-edge tower rose into the night, linked to both the Adjudication Lodge and the Administration building by fragile enclosed bridges. According to the maps Koschei had found, this was the executive tower, where the civil servants, diplomats, and other high-ranking civilians in the colony’s administration actually lived.

Ailla stayed in the shadows, which was easy enough to do in this world of permanent night, while Koschei picked the lock on the private lift that led to Viscount Gothard's home in the executive tower.

The lift opened, and Ailla followed him in. There were only two buttons on the control panel, up and down. Koschei pressed up, with a self-satisfied expression. 'Why are we going in here?' Ailla asked.

'There was nothing much of interest at Gothard's office, even though he is ranked as the colony's highest official. That means that either someone else is the real power here, most likely Adjudicator Terrell, or else the Viscount keeps the most vital information in his private quarters.'

That sounded logical enough to Ailla. 'What exactly are we looking for?'

'Any reference to "the" Darkheart. Clearly it isn't a reference to the planet itself, so it must be a code name for something else.' The lift door opened, and Koschei drew a small laser pistol from his pocket before stepping into the room beyond. 'I imagine it's either a ship, a creature, or some kind of technological device.'

Ailla was capable of drawing her own conclusions. 'Something capable of producing time distortion, for instance?'

'Precisely my thoughts. Anything related to temporal travel or manipulation would be quite a boon for a culture on the verge of collapse.'

'But they've been here three and a half centuries.' If they had found something useful in preventing the Empire's dissolution, then they would hardly have stayed out here and not used it. She switched on a small torch, casting the beam around the lounge they were in.

'It's quite a puzzle, I admit.' Low couches and presumably valuable pieces of statuary were scattered around in a sunken lounge area.

Viewscreens and murals were set into three of the walls, with windows forming the fourth. Arches led through into darkened rooms, which turned out to include a gleaming jewelled bathroom, a spotless kitchen, a well-stocked library, a sumptuous silk-draped bedroom and

– and the last door, to Ailla's surprise, was locked. Koschei nodded in the darkness. 'An inner sanctum.'

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'A locked inner sanctum.' She directed the torchlight on to a panel beside the door. A tiny needle glinted in a recess. Ailla recognized it at once as a cell sampler. She was actually quite looking forward to seeing how Koschei would get round this particular lock. She enjoyed watching him perform apparent miracles. That brightness and talent were the things that made him so fascinating to her.

Koschei merely opened a small drinks cooler in the lounge, and shook his head disparagingly. 'Nothing remotely palatable, but if I can offer you anything while we wait. . . '

Gillian Sherwin led Salamanca into her office at the rear of the flight deck. She tossed the jacket of her dress uniform aside – somehow the collar always felt too tight – and loosened the top button of the shirt that was under it. Salamanca remained silent. Sherwin kicked off her shoes and dropped gratefully into her chair. Now she felt a lot better.

'I trust everything went well,' Salamanca said finally.

'Everything went fine,' she confirmed with a grin. It faded. 'I don't like it.'

'You don't?' Salamanca looked as puzzled as was possible for a member of such an inherently inscrutable species. Sherwin couldn't blame him. Unfortunately, neither could she explain. It was just one of those feelings, and was too strong to ignore. 'Did they show any sign of upset or culture shock?'

'No.' Maybe that was it: such an isolated settlement should have been fairly secure in their beliefs, and the culture shock should have been visible. 'If they've been here, incommunicado, since the height of the Empire, surely they should have shown some signs of upset at discovering the Empire had fallen. But they didn't.' She rested one foot on the opposite knee and started massaging her aching sole. At least she wasn't getting any blisters. 'They're up to something. I think they knew about the fall of the Empire before we got here.'

'Perhaps they simply came here at the fall of the Empire, to escape the confusion of those times.'

Sherwin grinned to herself Salamanca was a master of the reasonable

explanation. ‘In that case they lied to us about their history, which 81

means they’re still up to something. Sorry.’

‘You are suggesting that they already knew of the Empire’s demise and the Federation’s rise? They could not know this if they left when they said they did. Unless –’ he hissed with displeasure’– unless the Veltrochni told them. They are the only ones who have been out here.’

‘And they’ve conveniently disappeared.’ She let that sink in. ‘Keep the ship on full-alert status while we’re here, but quietly.’

‘A quiet alert?’ For a being with no eyebrows, he did a remarkable impression of raising one.

‘I don’t know – just keep everyone on their toes. I don’t want to upset our hosts. I also don’t want to start ringing alarms that might betray our suspicions to them.’

The *Piri Reis* was visible from the surface of the planet as a bright star.

Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell watched it from the glass-roofed civic council chamber with mixed feelings. It was a reminder of home, true enough – a tiny pinpoint of memory in the darkness of times past.

The civic council chamber was a domed discussion area on the top floor of the Administration building. A huge circular desktop looped around the room, with a speaker’s podium in the gap at the centre.

Inactively dark screens lined the walls below the transparent dome itself. Up here, no sound could be heard from the reception in the public meeting halls below.

Terrell was glad of that. The speeches he’d heard down there fouled the air and turned his stomach. Earth had been the heart and soul of the Empire for half a millennium. Humans had brought peace and order to the Galaxy. More than that, though, Terrell had enjoyed being a part of something so great. It gave him a measure of pride and belonging to look up at the strip of stars that was the Galactic arm seen edge on from here, and think: I help maintain this. I help run it. He heard the door open behind him, and knew that Gothard had finally answered his summons. ‘Enjoying the party?’

‘Not exactly,’ Gothard said, his watery blue eyes following Terrell’s gaze. ‘This Sherwin seems to think that we will be glad to sign up for the Federation, and all the three centuries’ worth of technological 82

development we've missed out on.'

'The technology would be useful, that much is true,' Terrell admitted. The price would be too high, though. 'Earth not leading the Galaxy. . . It's a strange concept.'

'Yes. . . ' Terrell could hear Gothard's uncertainty. 'Look, Vernon, maybe we should make a gesture – to play for time, you understand?'

Terrell turned slowly, looking at the Viscount as he would regard an interesting species of beetle. 'Are you suggesting we make application to be reintegrated into this jumbled Federation?' Terrell was shocked.

Gothard had always been a loyal citizen of the Empire, albeit one with an eye for the ladies. Perhaps that was it: maybe the captain or the other Federation diplomat had charmed him.

'It'll give us access to new technologies, which the rest of humanity already have. We'll also gain a better tactical understanding of the current relationships between the various powers –'

'You spineless cretin,' Terrell hissed. 'Just because the Empire has fallen, you would go crawling to anyone with a powerbase? Did you hear that Sherwin? Her ship has a Terileptil engineer, and her first officer is a dragon!'

Gothard looked stung. 'I'm not forgetting our duties.' His tone told a different story. 'It's just that these races now cooperate, and it would be better to work from the inside. . . '

Gothard was overlooking one thing, Terrell noted dispassionately.

It wasn't much of a thing, but it was there. Frankly, Terrell liked being in charge here, and the rest of the populace were so ingrained into their current routine that they probably didn't care anyway. 'This so-called Galactic Federation is just a front. Look at them – Draconians, Terileptils and whatever. We've fought them all in the past, and won.

They couldn't conquer us by warfare, so now they wheedle their way into power with economic laws. This isn't a cooperative arrangement good for humanity. It's their revenge for all the wars we've beaten them in.'

Jamie was constantly expecting to be ambushed by guards as he and the Doctor returned to their suite. Now that the people here knew 83

they weren't with that other ship, they must wonder who they really were. Of course, maybe they were just so glad to get visitors after such long isolation that they didn't care too much. Jamie doubted it though: all his experiences in travelling with the Doctor had proved that people who had uniforms and guns also had secrets and schemes.

The lift opened up on to the atrium that formed the centrepiece of their suite, and Jamie yawned. 'I'll be glad to get my heid down, Doctor. It's been a long day.'

'Yes it has been quite a full day,' the Doctor agreed, absently checking his time path indicator again. It remained resolutely inactive.

'Now. . . ' He looked round at the three archways. 'Which of these was mine again?' He wandered off into the nearest one, but hopped back out before Jamie could go into his own room. 'Jamie, this is Victoria's room.' He held up the jacket she had been wearing when they left the TARDIS. 'But it's empty!'

'Maybe she couldn't remember which was hers either.' Jamie hurried into the room he was sure was his, and the Doctor went into the third. There was no sign of Victoria in either of them. Concern boosted Jamie's alertness, and he double-checked Victoria's room.

The Doctor looked worried too. 'She left before we did, didn't she?'

'Aye, I think so.' Well, she'd gone through a door, but maybe it wasn't the way out. . . 'I'm not sure though.'

'If she's wandering around out there, she might get lost.'

'Aye, and there's that demon thing. . . ' Jamie was moving before he finished the words. If there was danger here, he couldn't just let Victoria wander into it without at least trying to keep her safe.

The Doctor was somehow in the lift before him. 'We'll just have to start searching from the Administration building. Oh, no, wait.' He searched through his pockets, coming up with a paper and pen. 'I'd best leave a note in case she comes back while we're away.'

'Hey, Paxton,' a voice shouted.

It belonged to a lanky male in

that same gold-trimmed blue armour. He was approaching across a sparsely populated boulevard in front of one of the largest buildings, a

cone of red-washed transparent metal. ‘Did you get the demon?’

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There was a narrow alleyway just down the street, which could provide a useful means of escape if it could be reached. The polycrete walls were damp, but the darkness between them was welcoming.

‘Where are you going?’ The male wasn’t going to be dissuaded so easily, and had followed. Such devotion was admirable, but unfortunate.

‘Are you all right? When you didn’t report in, Hiller and I thought you –’ His words ended in a squeaked gasp, the colour draining from his contorted face.

His feet dangled over the blood-spattered ground, his eyes widened in liquid terror at the rasping purr which answered his unfinished question. ‘Pod travellers,’ the rasp asked. ‘Where?’

The male just gurgled, more blood dripping down to steam slightly on the chilled ground, then slumped. His body dropped, discarded, to the wet ground. He hadn’t been completely without use, though. His scent was definitely that of one who followed the travellers from the pod, and took them in a flyer. If he had come from the big building opposite, perhaps they were in there too.

Gothard returned to the executive tower through one of the tubular bridges, but still paused to look up at the pinpoint of the *Piri Reis* through the transparent roof. If truth be told, he almost wished he could simply go to Earth aboard that ship. It might be interesting to see what things were like these days.

Then again, with aliens in much more prominent positions now than the serving jobs they had previously filled, it might be a touch upsetting. Aliens making laws on Earth. . . And he used to think the stories he had heard about the Darkheart were odd.

Perhaps he had been Viscount of this world too long, that he felt so strong a need for new ground. Even here there were women who would sleep with him purely because he was a figure of power, and he used to enjoy that sense of attraction. Now even that had faded, though he kept the habit going. He knew them all so well that it had reached a point where they were more like an extended family than anything else, so it just didn’t seem right any more.

On Earth, things might not be better – probably worse, he was sure 85

– but at least they'd be different. Terrell would never understand that. The private lift came for him, and took him up to his penthouse.

He wondered if maybe moving to a different part of the city would ease the boredom. It wasn't as if he needed to worry about crime or impoverished areas.

No, he decided, the fact that the city was the same all over would just add to his depression. The lift stopped, disgorging Gothard into the lounge. 'Lights,' he snapped as he shrugged off his jacket. The lights in the lounge brightened, and Gothard froze as he looked across at his favourite chair by the drinks cabinet.

A bearded stranger in an immaculate suit was sitting casually in Gothard's chair, holding a gun on him. 'Good evening,' the stranger said politely. 'Oh, please sit down. I've just dropped by for a friendly chat about the, ah, Darkheart.'

Anger, indignation, shock and fear raced through the course of confusion in Gothard's mind. What did this stranger know about the Darkheart? 'Who are you?'

'My name is Koschei.' This Koschei, or whatever he called himself, leant forward. Gothard wanted to draw back from him, but found himself pinned into position, his eyes locked on to the stranger's. 'I am an Adjudicator In Extremis from Earth. You have seen my credentials, and will cooperate, as a loyal citizen of the Empire.'

Gothard thought about this, dazed. An Adjudicator In Extremis from Earth? Of course, how else could he have known about the Darkheart, unless he had had a similar briefing to – well, to the original mission that came here. 'I will cooperate.' But something was wrong, that Gothard couldn't quite fathom.

Koschei nodded in a friendly manner. 'I was just wondering if you would open this door for me, and show my friend and me around your private office here.'

Gothard stood, turning towards the door in question. A young woman was waiting there, with short dark hair and high boots.

There was something familiar about her, and Gothard's brain suddenly snapped back into focus. That was the woman with the Federation group!

‘You’re no Adjudicator,’ Gothard said wonderingly.

‘Federation

spies, more like.’ He drew a duelling knife from a forearm sheath, and lunged at Koschei with the blade, but Koschei was faster. He sidestepped the thrust and quickly grabbed Gothard’s head, twisting it with a crack. Gothard tumbled to the floor, his head lolling at a distinctly unhealthy angle.

Koschei cursed under his breath, and smoothed out his suit. He shook his head sadly. ‘Now, what am I going to do with you?’

This was inconvenient, not to mention untidy. A corpse was just exactly the sort of slip-up that he’d been trying to avoid. Bodies lying about the place betrayed a lack of order. In a way, having to kill was a symptom of being ill prepared, and possibly unprofessional. He should have made provision for Ailla’s being recognized like that.

‘Smooth move,’ Ailla commented, relieved.

‘It was stupid and unnecessary!’ He sighed. ‘How can I question him now?’ Koschei grabbed the body by one arm. ‘Still, we only really need one cell, and I daresay the unfortunate Viscount can provide us with that much.’ He lifted Gothard, pressing his lifeless hand to the plate beside the door. There was a faint click, and the door opened.

Koschei promptly dropped the body in the open doorway, so that it would block the door’s closure, and stepped through. The door control on the inside was a simple switch, so Koschei unscrewed it and shorted it out. That way, the door would remain open permanently.

Inside was a very spartan office, with plain insulated walls, and a single desk terminal. Koschei motioned to Ailla. ‘I trust you’ll be able to extract some useful information from here.’

‘I’ll see what can be done.’ Koschei nodded, and went back to think about how best to dispose of the Viscount’s body. He knew that Ailla would do what was necessary. For a human, she was quite competent.

Adjudicator Secular Brandauer was just preparing to file his report on the evening’s events, when he heard a commotion in the corridor outside. The excitement he was feeling at the news from Vacano faded somewhat. His secretary was protesting rather loudly. ‘Mr Brandauer

is engaged in important work, and can't be disturbed.'

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'Can't?' another voice demanded irritably. 'There's no such word in my vocabulary. Now let us through; this is a matter of the greatest urgency.'

'Aye,' another voice added, 'life and death.'

Brandauer opened the door, opening his mouth to speak, but was quickly pre-empted by that strange little Doctor and his companion.

They both pushed past the uniformed secretary, the Doctor advancing with a worried look. 'Ah, there you are!' He suddenly folded his hands with a beatific smile. 'I'm so sorry to burst in unannounced like this, but –' his face grew serious again'– our friend Victoria seems to have vanished. She's not in her room, and she's not still at the reception.'

Brandauer wondered what this had to do with him. Where some girl went after a party was none of his business. 'I'm sorry, but presumably she just went elsewhere. I don't see how it concerns me though.'

'You're in charge of this building, aren't you? We just wondered if perhaps you knew where she had gone. Perhaps she said something?'

Brandauer could feel the younger man's eyes on him. Presumably he and the girl were a couple. 'She left not long after you did.'

Jamie snorted. 'Maybe she did, but –'

'Wait a moment, Jamie,' the Doctor murmured. 'You say Victoria left after we did?' Brandauer nodded. 'Oh, I see. . . Then maybe she just hadn't reached our quarters yet.'

'That thought does seem logical,' Brandauer agreed.

'Still, she

might have got lost out there. I'll have her description sent out. I imagine you'll let us know if she has returned when you get back to your quarters.'

'Of course, and that's very kind of you.' The Doctor ushered Jamie towards the door. 'I think we'd better go and see whether Victoria has followed us home.' They went out, with a last apologetic smile from the Doctor.

Brandauer sat back down. If this girl was out wandering, who knew where she might end up? He touched an Intercom button on the desk.

Terrell's face appeared on a small monitor. 'Sir, the Doctor's just been in here. He claims that the girl Victoria is lost.'

'Lost?' Terrell murmured to himself 'Or spying? Put out a search for this girl, but when she's found, don't notify the Doctor. Just bring her in for questioning. We'll find out why they're really here, and if she does know about the Darkheart, then she could be considered another victim of the demon.'

'And the two men?'

'Them too. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.'

As soon as they were out of the Administration building, Jamie let his anger go. 'Why did ye not make them tell us? Surely ye don't believe a word that man said?'

'Oh but I do. Didn't you see their faces? They looked as upset as we were that she is out there wandering around.' The Doctor's face darkened. 'But I suspect their motives for that worry are rather different from ours.'

'Different?'

'Yes. It's as if they were concerned over where she might go.'

'Ah.' Now Jamie understood. 'They're hiding something and don't want any outsiders to see it?'

'Precisely.'

Jamie could see a sprightly sense of curiosity creeping across the Doctor's features, and could almost feel fate grabbing hold of him.

The Doctor was an awful man for getting himself into trouble, and Jamie wanted to head that off, at least until they knew that Victoria was safe. 'Well that's as may be, but it's none of our business.'

'Maybe not, but something near this planet affected the TARDIS, and that is our business.'

'Aye, and so is finding Victoria.' At least he could keep his priorities in

order.

The Doctor nodded decisively. ‘Yes, of course. Well, if she’s gone back to our quarters, she’ll have found the note I left. Assuming she hasn’t, I suggest we search for her, in the area surrounding the Adjudication Lodge there, and meet back at our suite, in, what, an hour?’

Jamie nodded reluctantly. At least this way he could feel he was 89

doing something about the problem. ‘I’ll go round this way. She probably couldn’t have gone far, could she?’

‘No, no, I’m sure she’s quite within walking distance.’

‘Right.’

Ailla could understand why there were some neo-Luddites who wanted rid of computers. The damned things were just so frustrating.

She had managed to break into the colony’s records, but they were either encrypted or in some obscure language. She wasn’t sure which, but suspected the latter, as no icebreaker program she had tried had been able to get anything useful out of the files.

She envied Koschei his ability to keep calm in the face of such frustrations, which seemed almost a supernatural ability to her. She stretched, and went out into the lounge. Koschei wasn’t there, though Gothard’s body was. She found him in Gothard’s silken bedroom, and got quite a shock when Gothard’s face turned towards her.

Koschei smiled faintly, checking the disguise’s fit in the dresser’s mirror. He nodded to his reflection, and turned back to her. ‘What do you think?’

‘So this is why they call you two-faced.’

He frowned. ‘Who does?’

She flushed. ‘Just they. It’s a human expression.’

‘Ah, of course.’ As if that explained everything. ‘And have you had any success in your ventures?’ he asked blandly. He must have heard her curses.

‘Not as such. All the files are either encrypted or just in some weird language.’

‘Really?’ He followed her through to the office, and she indicated the useless data. ‘I’ve never seen anything like that before, but. . . ’

Ailla pointed to the image of a pentagonal pyramid. ‘That looks like a building I saw on the way down here, in the shuttle. Maybe it’s something important.’

Koschei was immediately interested. ‘Where exactly was this?’

‘About three miles north-northwest of here.’ She waved in the general direction.

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Koschei nodded slowly. ‘Then it may just be worth a visit. Establish a link with our own equipment, and see if you can get a better reading from there.’

It was logical and rational, but she didn’t like being sent away from him yet again. They worked well as a team, so shouldn’t they do so now? ‘Aren’t you coming back too?’

‘No, I shall dispose of our unfortunate friend here –’ he indicated the Viscount’s cooling corpse’– and then draw attention away from here by leaving in public view. Hopefully when he’s reported missing, all the searches will be focused elsewhere in the city, and I can slip into this pyramid of yours.’

Koschei went into Gothard’s private lift, and knelt to open a trapdoor that was set into the floor. Once it was open, he dragged the body over into the lift, and tipped it through the opening. There was a wet smack from somewhere far below as he closed the trapdoor.

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Seven

The rain was still coming down, and Victoria was beginning to wonder if it would ever stop. Actually, she wasn’t even sure how it had begun, since there didn’t seem to be any clouds in the sky.

Illuminated signs in a rainbow of colours glowed everywhere, and at least saved the puddles from being turned to blood by the red sun.

Puffs of flame and steam sparkled on the horizon, emitted by the industrial plants on the outskirts of the city. They gave the impression

of a city ringed by fire, making it even easier for Victoria to compare the place to Dante's inferno.

She felt that, in many ways, this planet was even stranger than Vortis. At least there she had seen a truly alien landscape. Here there seemed to be no natural landscape at all, just an ugly city built on a featureless surface.

She knew she was lost, of course, but that feeling was nothing new.

It was like a miniature representation of her life as a whole. Lost and wandering. Walking seemed incapable of returning her to the door of the Adjudication Lodge any more than the TARDIS could deliver her to a safe home. And, oh, how she longed for such a home.

She couldn't really say such a thing to the Doctor or Jamie, lest they think they had offended her, and she didn't want to seem ungrateful to the Doctor. The thing was that the Doctor had a wanderlust that led him to explore, and Jamie had a zest for adventure; but Victoria had needed their support and kindness through her time of grief more than she needed to see new horizons.

She was grateful to them for that support, and they were terribly dear friends, but these days it seemed that her grief at the Daleks'

murder of her father had become more manageable. The Doctor had once predicted that her family would sleep in her mind, and she had found that of late this was true. Unfortunately, everywhere they went,

they met new friends, who either also died or else had to be left behind.

In many ways, the scales had tilted the other way, and now she was finding more sorrow instead of less. She realized that she had stopped in the middle of the street, and hastily carried on. She didn't know whether they still used vehicles that moved on wheels, but she did know that she didn't want to be hit by one.

Although it was relatively easy to locate the Adjudication Lodge, as it towered over all the other rooftops, It was more tricky to actually find a way in. The building must be at least a mile in circumference, Victoria estimated, and so far she hadn't reached the exit through which they had left for the reception.

She had thought that if she followed the edge of the building round,

she would eventually reach the vestibule, but walls linking the complex to other buildings kept blocking her way and forcing her to go round strange streets.

Already she was footsore, soaked through, and thoroughly miserable. There had been lots of men and women around, going to or from work, on errands, or simply strolling under those odd forcefields that kept the rain off them.

She wished she had something similar, as her dress was beginning to weigh as much as she did, with all the water it had soaked up.

Nobody had stopped to offer her any assistance, but Victoria wasn't certain whether that was a good or a bad thing. She wondered what sort of crime rate would necessitate so many policemen. It was Impossible to tell what anyone on the badly lit streets was thinking or planning, and it was far too easy to imagine them robbing her – or worse.

In short, she felt lost, alone, and frightened.

She tried to reason with her fears, reminding herself that she wasn't truly lost. She was following the edge of the building she wanted to enter. To her right was a sharp-edged tower, which she was sure had been near the Administration building where the reception was held.

Better still, she was certain they had passed it on the way, so if she went to the tower, she should be able to see the Adjudication Lodge's

entrance right along one of the neighbouring streets.

She tried to run a little faster, eager to get back, and dodged past the various uninterested pedestrians who were wandering around. A woman suddenly stepped in front of her, and she stopped with a yelp.

'It's all right,' the woman said, 'it's me, Ailla. We were talking at the reception?'

Victoria's heart climbed back down from her throat. 'Of course, yes.

You gave me such a start. . . '

The short-haired girl smiled sympathetically. 'I'm sorry.

You got lost?' Victoria nodded forlornly. 'And that dress isn't very

practical for what passes for the climate here.'

'It always seems to rain.' Victoria was glad it wasn't just she who didn't like that.

'I think it's condensation from the atmosphere processors. There isn't enough air here to breathe, so they have to continually make air, which cools quickly and condenses into rain. Have you never seen a terraformer colony before?'

'No,' Victoria admitted. She wasn't even sure what the word meant.

'I should really be getting back to the Doctor and Jamie.'

'Well, I can't help you there, but I can get you dried off' She nodded in the direction of a vehicle park. 'Come on, it's this way.'

'I thought you came with the Federation ship.' Was Ailla planning to take her there? That would be kind, but ultimately a bad idea.

'I did, but a friend of mine has another ship here.' She had led Victoria towards a flyer like the one in which they had arrived in the city. Ailla took a keychain from around her neck and opened the flyer.

'In you go; it's quite safe.' Victoria had heard that one before, but Ailla sounded sincere, and had seemed quite friendly at the reception.

Besides, what else could she do. She stepped into the flyer, expecting to find an interior like that of the one she had flown in earlier.

Instead she found herself back in the TARDIS.

Victoria was momentarily stunned. How could she be back in the TARDIS? Surely it was still out in that domed vineyard? Of course, she knew the Doctor claimed that the TARDIS had the power to change its outward appearance, but there had been no sign of that actually 95

happening on any of her travels. 'But, this is the TARDIS,' Victoria finally gasped.

Ailla looked surprised.

'Yes, so?

You're quite familiar with

TARDISes, I presume. The Doctor's is an older model, I gather, but

they don't change that much.'

The Doctor's. . .

Victoria recalled the Doctor saying something about another TARDIS nearby. Now that she understood, she began to notice that there were some differences between the Doctor's TARDIS

and this one. This room had filing cabinets and strange cylinders that the Doctor's didn't, but the hexagonal central console with its transparent central column was unmistakable.

'Is this yours?'

'No, it's Koschei's.'

The entrance foyer of the large building was brightly lit, and a cursory inspection in passing by the outer doors was enough to show that there were a number of scanner arches and sensors inset into the walls. They couldn't all be fooled.

Perhaps another entrance? No, they would all be scanned. The windows? The whole surface of the building was smooth with them, but there were polycrete supports rising up at regular intervals. It was the work of only a moment to circle the building and find a polycrete support that was unobserved from the street.

A high climb probably wouldn't be necessary, invigorating though it might be. Any window should do. The polycrete was smooth and solid and made slippery by the interminable rain, but Yielded to a penetrating grip. Climbing the polycrete support was almost like being young, shinning up a nursery growth. Getting inside was another matter. None of the windows were open, and breaking one would surely set off alarms.

There seemed to be little choice, though.

A single punch was

enough to knock a hole through the transparent metal of the window. Once a firm grip was established, it pulled free with some effort, and clanged against the roof of a parked flyer below.

An alarm wailed inside, echoing along the plain pastel corridors.

Already there were running footsteps and shouted orders. There was a corner to the left, and at the far end, a mural depicting some jingoistic scene or other from Earth history. Ideal.

Adjudicator Secular Brandauer indicated to the two point Adjudicators to go through into the breached corridor. He would have led himself, but wasn't stupid; being with the squad was enough to earn their respect without getting himself killed and leaving them leader-less in a crisis.

The point men went through, leapfrog-pattern, and along the corridor. Brandauer kept his disruptor charged and ready, even though the point men hadn't encountered any resistance. There was a door halfway along the inner wall – the other side was all windows – but it was locked. Brandauer keyed the override code anyway, and two more Adjudicators went in, crouching low. It was just an empty file room.

The point men reached the corner, where the corridor turned right, and advanced down it. Brandauer paused a few feet behind, leaning out of the gap in the surface of the building. There was nothing suspicious outside. Nothing, that is, except for a set of small holes dug into the polycrete support. There appeared to be three, perhaps two inches apart, with another a few inches aside and below. The pattern seemed to repeat itself at intervals below, though it was hard to tell in the perpetual lack of light on this miserable planet. Brandauer straightened, not stupid enough to try abseiling about outside the Adjudication Lodge. A forensics team could examine the marks properly.

He followed the point men to the corner.

They were halfway down the other leg of the corridor, looking around themselves in bafflement. The corridor ended in a mural depicting the conquest of Solos, but was otherwise empty. Brandauer immediately looked up at the ceiling. There were crawlspaces in there.

An armoured Adjudicator would be too large to fit, but whatever had come in might not have such problems. He had no doubt at all that something had come in through the extracted window. It was more than a feeling: it was as if he were in a room with something he knew

was hunting him.

He wondered why he should think that way – if something had come

in, it was he who would hunt it, not the other way round. He turned back to the nearest of the Adjudicators who had followed him up to this floor. ‘Get a scanning crew up here on the double. I want this whole floor gone over for anything amiss – life-form reading, any unusual energy spikes, whatever.’ He pointed to the smallest of the group. ‘You, out of that armour.’

While she was dropping the armour on the floor, Brandauer gave another man a leg up to open an inspection panel in the ceiling. Once the woman’s basic blue jumpsuit was unfettered by armour, both men lifted her up into the crawlspace. Brandauer handed her her disruptor and communicator. ‘Stay in touch. If you see anything, blast it if you can, then get out at the nearest panel and report its position.’

‘Yessir.’ She vanished, and Brandauer could hear her moving around up there. Odd – if an intruder had gone up there, wouldn’t anyone have heard it too? It didn’t matter; the first rule of business in colonial security was that nothing was impossible. He gathered the rest of the team around him, then nodded to the point men. ‘You two stay on guard here and help out the scanning crew. One of you cover the window breach, the other cover the file room door.’ They nodded.

Brandauer was mostly ready to leave, but something urged him both to stay out of curiosity, and flee out of fear. He looked over the corridor again. There was something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. It was as if he could smell the danger. He drew in a hissed breath.

That was it exactly: he could smell something. It was very faint, but undeniably animal and unusual.

The other Adjudicators could smell it too, subconsciously, he was sure. They were all eyeing their surroundings nervously, like animals waiting outside a slaughterhouse. ‘Do you smell anything?’

The nearest Adjudicator frowned. ‘Like wha– Yes sir.’ His expression cleared. ‘There is something. . . like a. . . I don’t know what it’s like.’

‘When the scanning crew get here, have them scan for exotic pheromones.’

‘Yessir.’

With a last overview of the corridor, Brandauer led the rest of the team out. First he had best notify Terrell of his suspicions. He had

scarcely reached the central lift network, however, when his communicator chirped. ‘Yes?’

‘This is Adjudicator Mills, at the executive tower. I think you’d better get over here.’

Brandauer suddenly had a terrible premonition. ‘On my way.’

The point men surveyed the dogleg corridor nervously. All the members of the Guild of Adjudicators here knew about the demon; Terrell and Brandauer tried to discourage conversations about it, but the everyday Adjudicators knew that it was they the creature hunted. If something had invaded the building it could only be the demon, come to find a heavier concentration of its favoured prey.

The man by the missing window panel sidled away from the hole, just in case. The other Adjudicator tested the lock on the file-room door, his eyes darting up and down the corridor. The Adjudicator by the window took a couple of steps down the other length of corridor, the window behind him, and out of sight of the man by the door.

There was something odd about the mural. No, not the mural, but the wall below. It was sort of blurred, as if a piece of glass was refracting the light with a slight distortion. He moved closer. Not glass, though

– something bifurcated, like. . . legs?

One of the Solonian Mutts on the mural moved, the other figures starting to dance around it. For a moment the Adjudicator was transfixed, uncertain if his eyes were playing tricks on him. Then he realized that the figures weren’t moving, but it was as if there was glass distorting his view of them. Glass that was moving?

The massive hand that slammed into his throat crushed his wind-pipe before he could even scream. The body crashed head first into the wall, leaving a pink stain as it dropped.

The other Adjudicator rushed towards the corner, and jerked to a halt as he saw his companion re-emerge from the other stretch of corridor. He lowered his disruptor. ‘What was that noise?’ He glanced down towards the mural. His companion was lying there in a bloody 99

heap. He looked between the dead and living versions of his comrade, the disruptor half raised in indecision. The weapon was smashed out of his hand, and a blow that shattered his skull also sent him flying out through the missing window panel.

The last remaining figure in the corridor looked up at the ceiling, then strode off along the window-edged corridor, and went deeper into the building.

Adjudicator Mills, a pleasant-looking fellow with thinning hair and usually an easy smile, was waiting by the side of the Executive Tower when Brandauer arrived. ‘What is it?’

Mills nodded towards a shadowed alcove with lift doors set into it.

‘Just there, sir. I was doing my hourly rounds, when I saw this.’ He directed the beam of a torch on to the base of the doors. An unmistakable red ooze was squeezing out from under them. Brandauer had suspected as much. ‘Is anyone missing?’

‘Not that I know of.’

Brandauer started to override the lift doors. ‘What about the Viscount?’

‘He left a few minutes ago, with a girl.’ That at least was normal behaviour, though usually Gothard brought the girls to his home. The door finally opened, and both Adjudicators stepped back. Brandauer hit his communicator switch. ‘This is Adjudicator Secular Brandauer to all Adjudicators: the intruder may have adopted the identity of Viscount Gothard. Arrest the Viscount on sight.’ He switched channels.

‘Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell, please report to the executive tower.’

Koschei had taken a long and circuitous route through the city, for the benefit of any security cameras, before slipping into a shadowy flyer repair station to divest himself of Gothard’s rather gauche suit, and his face.

The Adjudicators would no doubt have a happy time following the false trails he had left, which should leave him free and clear to take a look at this pyramid. Walking wasn’t an attractive option, since he had come to rest on the opposite side of the city from where he wanted to 100

go, but he hadn’t picked a flyer repair station by chance.

All the flyers inside were basically the same, with some in merely for redecoration or cosmetic fixes rather than potentially dangerous problems. It was the work of only a few minutes to find one that was here only to have its passenger upholstery replaced, and steal it.

Hathaway picked up his notebook computer and headed for the door.

It was almost time for him to make his weekly report to the captain on the crew's fitness, and he had a reputation for getting there just in the nick of time, which he didn't want to jeopardize. He stepped out from the office adjoining the infirmary, turned into the main companionway that ran the length of the ship, and froze.

A faintly rippling greyness was rushing across the corridor. It disappeared so quickly that he wasn't even sure he'd seen it. Then again, he was a doctor; if he was unwell enough to hallucinate, he should have noticed. The distortion seemed to have come through from the storeroom. There was nothing there that could have caused such a bizarre effect – just the medical stores. Oh, and that injured Xarax of Ipthiss's.

He hesitated. Whatever was going on couldn't have been caused by the Xarax, but it might have upset it. He decided that he had better check, just to be on the safe side. The storeroom was wide and brightly lit, with everything securely sealed in containers bolted to the walls in case of loss of gravity. There was no Xarax in there.

Hathaway circumnavigated the room, peering down even the narrowest of shelf alleys. Definitely no Xarax. Nor was there the distinct cloves smell that an injured Xarax gave off. It couldn't have gone under its own power, and one could hardly cart an adult Xarax through the corridors of the ship without getting noticed.

Perhaps Ipthiss would know. And if not, he'd certainly want to be informed about the disappearance of his coworker. Hathaway sealed the storeroom door and set off

A ring of Adjudication Division flyers was parked around the pyramid when Koschei reached it. He had actually landed half a mile away,

intending to make a stealthier approach, and was glad that he had done so.

As well as the flyers, a pair of armoured Adjudicators patrolled, toting heavy disruptor rifles. At each of the pyramid's five corners, a small bunker was embedded into the ground, with the projection grid of a heavy deflection shield generator set into the roof Cannon emplacements were also dotted around, their muzzles pointing skywards, and directly above the pyramid's apex was the gleaming speck of a starship in geostationary orbit. Judging by its size at this distance,

it was probably the Imperial assault carrier.

The pyramid itself was quite unlike any other building in the city.

In fact, it didn't seem to be a building. It simply grew out of the rocky ground itself. That was a good sign, as it suggested that the pyramid pre-dated the Imperial presence here. If the Empire had come here looking for something, this was all they would probably have found.

It was a huge structure, larger than Khufu's pyramid at Giza, and perhaps even wider than any of the great pyramids on Phsester Osiris.

Though not especially high compared with Osirian pyramids, it was very squat, and sprawled out across a considerable area. Each of the five sides seemed to be of equal dimensions. The topmost dozen metres or so, however, wasn't solid, but instead was like a wireframe model. The corners met at the tip in the form of slim columns of the same material. Still, it all appeared to be one single piece growing out of the bedrock of the planet.

Koschei crouched down behind one of the Adjudication flyers, now back in his impeccably tailored suit. He could almost feel the presence of important information inside the pyramid, some knowledge that was so vital he must have it at all costs. Strangely, despite all the technological protection, and the number of Adjudication flyers, the two guards seemed to be the only ones here. That was a puzzle to Koschei, who wasn't sure whether it meant that they had simply become lax after three and a half centuries, or other guards had been drawn away to join the search for the Viscount's killer. He had no doubt the body would have been found by now.

There was only one way to find out, and that was to try to get 102

inside. It seemed clear that the entrance was up at the apex, so he need simply time the guards' patrol, and dash across when they were out of sight. The pyramid's sides were at a shallow enough angle to walk up quite easily.

Koschei dashed across the open ground to the pyramid as soon as the two Adjudicators disappeared round the first corner. He had to adjust the speed of his climb to account for the narrowing spiral he needed to describe as he rose, but he found no problems in reaching the apex while keeping the body of the pyramid between the guards and himself

The apex, in which he now found himself, was a shallow depression,

with a wide spiral staircase that descended along the inside of the pyramid in multiples of five sections. Pleased at his easy evasion of the guards, and the prospect of discovering something that others thought they could keep secret from him, Koschei started to descend.

Although it was technically the middle of the *Piri Reis*'s night shift, the ship's corridors were still reasonably busy, with crew members going about their business. Surgeon Hathaway descended to the engineering decks. For a moment, he wondered about the wisdom of running at a Terileptil, and forcibly reminded himself that they were all friends now, not like when the Empire was in charge and the Terileptils were vicious privateers. 'Ipthiss!'

An engineer turned. 'Can I help you, Surgeon Hathaway?'

'I was looking for Ipthiss. Isn't he here?'

'No. I assume he's out on a maintenance job somewhere else in the ship. If there's a question I can answer. . . '

'Has Ipthiss reassigned that Xarax with the fractured foreleg?'

'No. He said it would be unable to work for a few days.' The engineer tilted his head. 'Is something wrong?'

Hathaway wasn't really sure how to answer that. 'Well, maybe. It's gone.'

'You mean it has died?'

'No. I mean, I don't know. . . Well, I mean it's gone. Vanished. It was sedated in the medical supplies room, and it isn't there now.'

'Could your sedatives have worn off?'

'No way.' Hathaway was as sure of that as it was possible to be sure of anything with a Xarax. 'Anyhow, even if it had, how would it go a-wandering through those corridors without being noticed? I wondered if Ipthiss had changed his mind and returned it to duty.'

The engineer grimaced, and went back into the circular chamber that held the ship's main computer core. 'Computer, can you account for the whereabouts of all Xarax on board?'

There was a warning chime. 'Please restate the question. There is no

species, society or cultural matrix listed in my vocabulary as

“Xarax”.’

Hathaway felt his heart sink. The engineer frowned. ‘I don’t understand that. To lose all reference to a species which has crew members on board, the computer’s files must have been corrupted, but no fault has shown up. Computer, where is Chief Engineer Ipthiss?’

‘There is no crew member by that name listed in the ship’s personnel file.’

Hathaway and the engineer exchanged looks. ‘Who is chief engineer?’

‘The chief engineer is Lieutenant Commander Tippett.’

‘But that’s me! I’m not chief engineer.’

‘Maybe you’d better check over the computer. I’ll notify the captain, and have a scan made for the Xarax, and Ipthiss.’

Eight

Allia had been busy pottering around the console in Koschei’s TARDIS. She had been setting up the computers for some task, but Victoria was glad of the chance to dry off ‘Did you two come here looking for the Doctor?’

Ailla shook her head. ‘Not that I know of. Neither of us knew he was here. The TARDIS ran into some sort of temporal distortion wave and we stopped to check its source.’ Victoria wondered if this was the thing they had encountered. Ailla appeared quite distracted.

Her casual mask slipped as she zoomed the scanner in on a distant open area with what might have been a mound. ‘Where is he?’ she murmured. Her brows were knitted in concern.

‘Who are you looking for?’

‘Koschei. He’s gone off to investigate this pyramid structure.’ Victoria was surprised to realize that it was a pyramid, since it was so squat that it looked more like a low hill. ‘I wish he wouldn’t go off into danger like that.’ Victoria stifled a laugh, and Ailla grinned. ‘The guys do like their games, don’t they?’ She looked back at the screen, her brows still furrowed, but nevertheless smiling. ‘Koschei knows what

he's doing. He's always had a knack for getting out of trouble as quickly as he gets into it. As traits go, it does get kind of likeable.'

'How did you meet him?' Victoria asked.

'On Earth, in the twenty-eighth century. I was reporting on the growth in smuggling to and from Earth. One of the smugglers took exception to that, and tried to have me spaced. Koschei saved me.'

'What happened to the smuggler?'

'I reprogrammed his flight computer and transponder codes, so that it broadcast the nature of himself and his ship to all and sundry. I gather he was sentenced to a total of three and a half thousand years'

hard labour on a Draconian penal colony. Obviously, he'll have died long ago, but it's the principle that matters.'

'He doesn't sound much like a gentleman to me,' Victoria admitted.

'Oh, he wasn't. Koschei is, though.'

Victoria's eyes had been seeing things as if there were two realities superimposed. She knew she had seen the air with which Ailla carried herself in someone else. An air of loyalty and paradoxically serene excitement. . . Of course!

Victoria smiled knowingly.

Brandauer led Terrell aside after the Adjudicator In Extremis had had a chance to examine Gothard's penthouse lift. 'I thought the demon might have done this.' Terrell was surprised. It had never come into the city, which was the main reason why most of the populace had never even heard of it, except as some vague rumour. 'It has also attacked the Adjudication Lodge,' Brandauer went on. 'It pulled out a wall panel to get in. I've got a scanning crew up there now.'

Terrell shook his head. 'This isn't the demon's work – all that mess was a result of hitting the bottom of the shaft. I'd suggest a broken neck as cause of death, with the drop done to disguise it. Path lab should be able to confirm or refute that. Besides, the demon doesn't bother to hide the bodies.' A human killer was rare, in fact unheard of, here. After all, who would commit a crime on a world where most of the populace were law-enforcers? That meant that the visitors were

obvious suspects. Of course, some girl might just have got offended at Gothard's tastes. 'Find out who he was with tonight.'

Brandauer nodded, and his communicator chirped. 'Yes?' Terrell moved away to examine the door to Gothard's inner office. The computer was powered down, but someone could have been trying to access it. He shrugged; getting into the files wouldn't have done them much good.

'Sir,' Brandauer said, after switching off the communicator. 'That was the scanning crew. They say there isn't enough to go on, but the two men I left on guard are dead – hacked to pieces.'

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'Now that *is* the demon's style.' Terrell didn't like this. Why had it changed its pattern?

'I had the vents and crawlspaces checked, but there was no sign of it.'

'There never is. You finish up here, and I'll go back. Perhaps we can spot something on the monitors. Or maybe our guests might have something to say on the matter.'

Jamie had never had any qualms about tramping round the Highlands even in weather as wet as this, but the rocky ground here was threatening to make his feet rebel. Worse still, he had seen no sign of Victoria, despite having trudged down every neon-lit alley he could find on his way around his half of the Adjudication Lodge.

At first he had thought that she would stand out a mile in that dress of hers, but the people here were wearing such a mixture of costume types that she would have blended in almost invisibly – even in that dress.

Nobody had bothered him as he wandered round, and it might be possible to take that as a sign that Victoria could have gone anywhere without being troubled. However, he had noticed on his travels with the Doctor that people tended to give a brawny young Scot like him a wider berth than they would a pretty girl.

He was unconsciously slowing down as he approached the entrance to the Adjudication Lodge, not wanting to think of giving up on the search for someone he cared about. He knew that for all his protestations of logic, the Doctor would be feeling the same way underneath.

You couldn't travel together for so long with someone you didn't care for at all.

He almost bumped into the Doctor as he crossed the street towards the Lodge. The Doctor looked at him eagerly, his face falling when he saw that Jamie was alone. 'No sign of her?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I suppose she could have just gone away from the Adjudication Lodge. . . '

Jamie looked up, feeling a faint chill. 'This place is so high she must have been able to see it over the roofs of the other buildings.'

The Doctor suddenly yelped with excitement. 'But of course! How could I have been so stupid?'

What was he talking about now? 'How stupid?'

The Doctor was ferociously rooting around in his pockets. 'This is the tallest building, Jamie.' He flourished a small pocket telescope.

'From the top we could survey the whole city!'

Jamie's spirits rose, but only momentarily. 'But what if she went into a building? You'd no' see her with that thing then.'

'No, but all the security monitors in every building of the city transmit to here. If we can find someone to go through the images from the reception for us, they can get a computer to see if any other image in the city's cameras matches Victoria.' The Doctor ushered Jamie through the entrance lobby and into the lift.

Jamie was glad that there was a chance to find Victoria so easily.

'We should have done that in the first place.'

'Probably, but the exercise won't have hurt us. That's the problem with inspiration, Jamie: it doesn't exactly make house calls at your beck and call.' He peered at the lift's control panel. 'Now, I wonder how we get this thing to go up to the top floor.'

'I think you're too late.' The door was already opening at their suite.

'Hey, even the lift knows where we're staying.'

‘Not exactly, Jamie.’ The Doctor pointed to the glowing eye of a monitoring sensor set into the ceiling of the lift. ‘I suspect the lift is programmed to take certain people – like us – to certain places, so that we can’t go wandering where we don’t belong.’ He glared up at the sensor. ‘Rotten spoilsports that they are.’

He left the lift, moving straight to the window and pulling open the small telescope. Jamie followed, glancing into the archway to Victoria’s room – and was surprised to see her coming out of it, now dressed in her trouser suit again. ‘Victoria!’

‘Not yet,’ the Doctor said indistinctly from behind his telescope.

‘Here!’ The Doctor turned, his eyebrows disappearing under his fringe as he rushed across. ‘Where have ye been?’

‘We’ve been so worried about you,’ the Doctor said sternly, before Victoria could answer. ‘We must have searched half the city.’

‘I got lost.’

She looked so forlorn that Jamie felt terribly guilty at greeting her with a demand. ‘Aye, well, at least you’re safe and sound, that’s the main thing.’ Though Jamie wouldn’t admit it, he did have some fears.

Not for himself, of course. Jamie didn’t fear man or beast, but, having seen so many family and mends lost in the aftermath of the rebellion, one did develop a fear of losing any more friends.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘I’m sorry. We’re just so glad you’re safe.’

Victoria relaxed and smiled. ‘I might not have been, but Ailla found me.’

The Doctor’s face darkened, only very slightly. ‘Ailla?’

‘She means me, Doctor.’ The speaker was a tall and athletic woman with short dark hair sculpted into curls. She was wearing high boots, slacks and a billowing blouse under a loose jacket. She eyed the Doctor with what seemed to Jamie to be the look of a cat edging through another cat’s territory.

‘I’m very grateful to you, er, Ailla.’

‘And you must be Jamie.’

‘Oh, eh, aye. Pleased to meet you.’ He felt very boyish all of a sudden. Victoria nudged him none too gently in the ribs, and he stopped staring. ‘I mean, I’m glad ye found Victoria.’ Victoria smiled.

‘Can we get you anything?’ the Doctor asked.

Ailla smiled a little more, but shook her head. ‘I’d better be getting back. Koschei wanted some data examined. Thanks all the same.’ She walked off towards the lift.

The Doctor skirted round the central mound of plants in the little atrium. ‘Just a minute.’ He looked confused. ‘Did you say Koschei?’

‘Yes. I mentioned you to him earlier. He’s quite looking forward to seeing you again.’

‘Is he? Oh, then I shall try not to disappoint him.’ Ailla merely smiled in return as the lift closed.

Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell sat back in his private sanctum at the heart of the operations and monitoring centre. From the conversation

he had just monitored, it seemed his suspicions were correct, and that these three were in league with this new Federation.

They were all humans, surely, so why were they being so underhanded, unless they were simply doing the dirty work for others?

Some alien power, perhaps, who knew that the colony wouldn’t welcome them with open arms.

It was a shame he hadn’t ordered a similar watch on each Federation visitor individually, or he might have known that this one had not returned to the Federation ship with the others. Still, she was a stranger here, so she would stand out enough to be picked up when the time was right.

Jamie had gone into the kitchen to fetch a much-needed hot drink for Victoria. She still wasn’t sure how the Doctor knew these people, if he really did. ‘Doctor, this Koschei has a TARDIS too, just like yours.’

‘Well, he would do if he’s what I suspect.’

‘Which is?’

‘One of my own people, Victoria. And I imagine he’s hunting me.’

Victoria could scarcely believe it. Ailla, at least, had seemed so friendly. ‘But Ailla says they didn’t even know we were here. She says that they met some sort of time distortion.’ The science of it was beyond her, though.

The Doctor frowned as Jamie returned with a steaming mug, which he handed to Victoria. ‘So Koschei and Ailla encountered the same time anomaly that we did?’ the Doctor asked. Victoria nodded, having all but forgotten her earlier fears. ‘Then that proves it wasn’t a fault in the TARDIS, and the fact that two TARDISes were both drawn to this area practically confirms that this is where it came from.’

Jamie scratched his head. ‘Then the people here did it.’

‘It seems likely. At first I thought it might be a natural result of the gravitational dynamics here, but this time sensor would have registered that.’

Terrell sat bolt upright. So these travellers did know about time distortion, and there were other strangers on the planet that he didn’t

know about! And all of them seemed to be working in cooperation.

Humans working with aliens was an old story. It was, in fact, the Cybermen’s preferred method of initial infiltration, and it was undeniably effective. The concept saddened Terrell, however. There was always someone who felt superior to his fellow man, and they were invariably easy prey for those other races who felt themselves superior to humanity.

He knew that some would say he must feel superior too, to run a colony, but Terrell didn’t believe that for a moment. It was merely his training and experience that had led him to be chosen for this posting, and there were channels through which he could be replaced. He didn’t mind that, since he was, after all, only human.

The Empire as a whole had been superior, of course, but only because it had to be, to survive. The Galaxy was in many ways a jungle, with survival of the fittest as the main natural law. Perhaps the visitors were fitter than he had anticipated. He flicked an intercom switch. ‘Brandauer, Terrell. It might now be wise to make our relationship with the Federation spies a little more. . . formal. Have someone bring them down for a chat.’

‘Understood.’

The lift shafts had allowed rather more freedom of movement, as well as channelling the sounds and scents to home in on. The polycrete walls of the shaft were no obstacle to climbing, and the ascent was quite rapid. Already, the travellers’ voices were audible. Another sound was making the voices too indistinct to interpret, though – a deep humming sound.

A tiny light was flickering above too, on the base of the descending lift. There wasn’t enough room anywhere in the smooth sides of the shaft to squeeze in to let it past, and if the lift was going all the way to the bottom, it would bring a crushing death with it.

There was, however, a hatch set into the bottom of the lift. If anyone was inside, they could give the alarm, but there was no other way out.

A solid thump knocked the hatch back into the lift, allowing access.

Fortunately, the lift was empty, so there was time to set the hatch back 111

in its gap. The control panel showed that the lift was indeed going all the way down. Of course, it was possible that the lift might now become a trap, if there was no other way out of it.

A quick scan of the walls and ceiling showed another hatch overhead, and that was opened just as easily. Once up on the roof of the lift, the hatch was pulled shut. Now the climb to where the travellers were would be easy.

The Doctor was standing by the window, peering down. ‘You know, there’s something very odd about these people that I can’t quite put my finger on.’

Jamie shrugged. ‘They’re a wee bit dour, maybe, but –’

‘I know what it is,’ Victoria announced suddenly. Both of them looked at her, their expressions questioning. ‘Haven’t you noticed that there are no children here?’

‘Eh?’ Now that he came to think about it, she was right. There were lots of people bustling through the dark streets, many in civilian fashions rather than Imperial uniforms, but no children. ‘Maybe they keep them indoors for safety.’ As far as Jamie was concerned, that was fine by him. He was sure that it was wonderful to be a father, but

other people's children were irritatingly noisy distractions.

'What an awful life that must be.'

'Aye, probably. . . ' Jamie scanned the street through the rain. There were men and women going in every direction, some singly, some arm in arm. All of them were adults, but none older than middle age. 'I'll tell ye something else. There don't seem to be any old people here either.'

In answer, Victoria screamed piercingly.

The lift doors were buckling, great scars opening up in the metal. A rippling distortion suddenly pushed through like an arm, and tugged the door aside. A bipedal refraction, like a statue made of crystal-clear water, leapt into the atrium. The Doctor shoved Victoria towards the farthest room. 'Come on! If we can get a window open –'

Jamie didn't let himself be distracted by the Doctor's instructions to Victoria. All that bothered him was somehow keeping this. . . what-112

ever it was away from his friends. He grabbed a potted palm, lifting it off the floor as much by willpower as strength, and swung the pot-end of it at the moving distortion.

The pot shattered, blasting compost across the atrium. The creature buckled under the impact. From the dirt that clung to it, Jamie could see that it was a good couple of feet taller than he was, and very brawny.

Maybe the Doctor had the right idea in running away. If one of these pots would break through the windows, they could try climbing down. Before he could move, however, the inner lift's doors juddered open and armoured figures burst out.

The indistinct creature turned, and Jamie grinned. Here were reinforcements. The Adjudicators raised their guns, and Jamie belatedly realized that they hadn't yet registered the creature's presence. They were aiming their guns at him. 'You and the Federation spies are under –'

The Adjudicator didn't get any further, as a glassy arm smashed the gun from his grasp and hurled him across the room. He hit the wall head first, leaving a red stain. Jamie hurled himself through into the far room as the rest of the Adjudicators sprayed the atrium with

energy. Pot plants erupted in showers of earth, and craters were blasted in the walls, but the creature wasn't hit.

From the relative and very temporary safety of the Doctor's suite, Jamie could hear blood-curdling roars, and more gunfire and screams.

Victoria huddled against the Doctor, having gone beyond screams and into shocked whimpering. Jamie couldn't really blame her. 'What is that creature?' she squeaked.

Jamie wished he knew. 'It's hard to see, like the *fear liath mhor*.

Anyway what we need is to get out of here. If I can break one of these windows. . . '

The Doctor shook his head. 'They're metal, Jamie, remember?' He looked cautiously towards the first dead Adjudicator, and pointed.

'That disruptor, though. . . We could certainly cut the window panel open with that.' He nodded to Jamie encouragingly.

Jamie could still hear shooting and roaring out in the atrium and 113

the other suites, and didn't relish the idea of going out there even for a moment. He also knew that there was no other way out, and when the fighting was over, they would be trapped in here and at the mercy of whoever had won. He nodded, and sidled up to the front door of the suite.

'No, Jamie, you'll be killed,' Victoria protested.

Jamie hardly heard her, so much was he concentrating on timing his run. The disruptor was about nine feet away. He poked his head out cautiously to see how the battle was going, and ducked back hurriedly as a blast hit the door jamb. 'Now, be careful, Jamie,' the Doctor warned.

Jamie was trying to be as careful as he could, but the attempt to get the weapon would be a risk, no matter what. The tide of battle seemed to be turning in favour of the creature, as there were more screams than disruptor blasts, and a quick glance confirmed this – as well as laying in enough material for a year's worth of nightmares for Jamie. With no idea whether he'd get another chance, Jamie leapt out, grabbing the disruptor, then flung himself headlong back into the Doctor's suite just ahead of a shower of disruptor blasts.

‘Here ye go.’ He handed the weapon to the Doctor.

‘Ah yes, this should do quite nicely, I think.’ The Doctor opened a panel in the side of the weapon, and started adjusting some components. ‘There. Now, stand back, you two.’

Jamie held Victoria safely at the back of the room, while the Doctor aimed the disruptor at the metal window and fired, sweeping the glimmering beam in a wide circle. As soon as the circle was complete, the disc of transparent metal fell away from the wall. The Doctor leant out through the hole, absently tearing the innards out of the disruptor and dropping them on the floor. Then he let go of the gun.

Jamie and Victoria came over, the demure girl wincing at the sounds of violence from the rest of the rooms.

Jamie looked out.

The

ground was quite far below, but the wall of the Adjudication Lodge was sloped, with a tiny ledge on each floor. ‘How will we get down?’

she asked nervously.

‘That slope is relatively gentle,’ the Doctor explained. ‘If we lie flat

against it, we should be able to slide from floor to floor in perfect safety. The rain will help.’

She shook her head. ‘I can’t.’

‘Would you rather stay here?’ He gave her a kindly look. ‘Jamie can go down first, then I’ll lower you, and he’ll catch you.’

Terrell raced through the busy hallways, thoughts speeding through his mind just as urgently. Wasn’t the demon in league with the Federation spies? Yet it had been about to attack them – the only time it had shown hostility towards anyone other than Adjudicators. Terrell knew as well as anyone that certainty in life was a foolish concept dreamt up by people with small minds, but even he hadn’t expected such an uncertain turn of events.

Armoured figures were crowding around every lift terminus, flow-ing up towards the battleground like water from a spring. Perhaps there

were two mutually antagonistic alien factions or races at work here, with his colony caught in the middle. ‘The demon?’

Brandauer was waiting by the central shaft. ‘He’s still in the guest wing.’

Terrell nodded. ‘Seal the complex. Get every Adjudicator in the city here.’

Victoria could feel wet metal against her face, but couldn’t open her eyes to look at it. The whole front of her body was chilled as she slipped heart-stoppingly down the side of the building. Her arms felt about to come out of their sockets as the Doctor lowered her, and she felt slightly guilty about how much his arms must be protesting at holding her up. A pair of strong hands encircled her trouserlegs, and Jamie guided her feet on to the narrow ledge. Once settled, she looked at the Scotsman beside her.

As ever, he was being both practical and concerned, first checking the distance they still had to go, then looking at her. ‘Are ye all right?’

‘Yes, I think so.’ She knew he was trying to be reassuring, but he obviously needed to be reassured about her. ‘It’s not so bad now that I know what to do.’

‘We’ll make a Highlander of ye yet.’ Victoria had never so much as ventured into a treehouse at home, so this was most disconcerting.

With a wobbly yell, the Doctor slid down beside them, and promptly started to topple backwards.

‘Oh, no!’ Without thinking, Victoria clapped a hand over his shoulder, pushing him back against the transparent metal, as Jamie did the same from his side. The Doctor took the already-soaked handkerchief from his breast pocket, and ineffectually mopped his brow with it. ‘I say, that wasn’t very clever, was it?’ He seemed to recover himself.

‘Now, you both know what to do? Just keep yourselves pressed flat against the wall, and you’ll stop on each ledge.’

Victoria nodded. ‘I understand.’ She wasn’t looking forward to it, though.

Jamie, of course, was used to this sort of strenuous activity. ‘It seems

easy enough. I'll go down first, in case any more beasties are waiting for us.'

'That's a good idea, Jamie,' the Doctor agreed. 'Victoria and I will catch you up.' There was a strange sound of wet cloth squeaking across metal, which stopped and started several times.

'It's all clear,' Jamie called up after a moment.

The Doctor took hold of Victoria's hand. 'Are you ready?'

'No, but I suppose we have to.'

'I'm afraid so.' He smiled. 'Much easier than walking down dozens of steps.' Victoria knew which she would have preferred. 'Now. Lean forward, and lift your feet clear from the ledge. . . '

They jerked downward, the ledge painfully cracking Victoria's knees, and bringing tears to her eyes. She was otherwise unhurt, and she certainly wouldn't forget to take the ledge into account on the next floor.

They repeated the exercise another few times, before Jamie finally helped them off the bottom ledge and on to the ground. The Doctor immediately clapped his hands in delight. 'That was fun, I must say.

I'll have to try that again sometime.'

'Let's not,' Victoria suggested. 'It's not a very comfortable way to travel.'

The Doctor's eyes laughed. 'No, I suppose not, but it did the job, didn't it?' He shook the rainwater off his coat.

Jamie was wringing out the hem of his kilt. 'What now?'

'We can't stay here; I don't think we'll be entirely welcome here any more.'

'Then we can go back to the TARDIS and leave?'

'Half right, Jamie. We can go back to the TARD– oh, no, we can't, can we? That Terrell said he was having it brought here.'

Victoria's heart sank. Now they couldn't go back into the building

where the TARDIS either was or soon would be. Jamie scratched his head. ‘What about that lassie Ailla?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Oh, I don’t think that would be a good idea –’

‘But of course it is,’ Victoria exclaimed. Ailla was friendly, and had another TARDIS. At the very least she would be able to give them safe lodgings. ‘We can’t stay out on the streets, or we should all die of pneumonia.’

The Doctor grimaced in an upset manner. ‘I suppose this is rather an exceptional circumstance. . . Oh, all right. Do you know where Koschei’s TARDIS is?’

‘Yes, of course. It’s not far from here.’ She pointed towards a vehicle pool a few hundred yards away. ‘It’s over there, but it looks like one of those flying machines.’ Her spirits lifted, and she found herself starting off across the street. ‘Come on, this way.’

The guest wing was like a charnel house, with dark carmine smears spread throughout the wrecked rooms. Armoured bodies lay broken and lifeless around the room, and smoke wafted gently from numerous craters in the walls.

Amidst it all, one survivor walked to the hole that had been cut in the window. The scents of the travellers from the pod in the vineyard were strongest here. There was no sign of them below, however, and the unending rain was constantly washing away any chance of tracking them by scent out of doors.

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Sensitive ears could already hear the lift coming up again with more armoured humans. Perhaps they could be dealt with too, but there were too many here to kill alone, and there had been enough death for one day. More than enough, even though they were human.

The hole in the window had already been used for escape once, so it could be so again.

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Nine

VictorialedtheDoctorandJamietoanAdjudicationflyernotun-like the one

that had brought them to the city in the first place.

There were several other identical flyers around. ‘Are ye sure this is the right one?’ Jamie asked.

‘This is the one I was in.’

The Doctor pressed his ear against the side, then nodded. ‘This is a TARDIS, yes.’ He pulled himself up to his full height, and rapped sharply on the roof of the flyer. ‘I just hope there’s somebody in,’

Jamie said. As if to answer his doubts, the door opened.

Ailla’s head emerged. ‘Well, don’t just stand there.’

The Doctor went in first, and stopped, looking over the spacious control room and hexagonal console. He looked to Jamie not unlike a clansman seeing a new battle standard for the first time, both admiring and faintly surprised. Jamie was surprised, too, that there could be another machine as complex as the TARDIS. This one had a number of differences from the Doctor’s machine, though. For one thing, there were two cylinders to one side, beyond which was a row of computer banks lining the wall of a corridor that stretched off deeper into this TARDIS. The panels on the console also seemed more crammed with fiddly instruments than were those in the Doctor’s TARDIS. Presumably the differences were because this was a more modern version.

Ailla had followed them in. ‘Well, what do you think?’

‘Er, it’s braw,’ Jamie said politely. ‘Very –’ what was that phrase they used in the more modem eras the Doctor had taken him to?’–

state-of-the-art.’ He smiled, proud at having remembered the phrase.

The Doctor fiddled with some controls on a panel, and Ailla slapped his hand away in a familiar gesture that Jamie found all the more amusing this time, since he wasn’t on the receiving end. ‘Well it’s certainly flashier, I suppose. Of course, that’s no guarantee of quality. . . ’

Ailla grinned. ‘Is that jealousy I hear?’

‘Not at all. I just happen to think that getting from A to Z is more

important than having all these go-faster stripes.' Jamie noticed that, despite this protest, the Doctor was examining the console like a dog examining a butcher's storeroom.

'Given that, you didn't come here to compare notes on TARDIS upgrades.'

The Doctor stepped back from the console. 'I was thinking we might compare notes on this temporal distortion we encountered, and on what evil is at work here.'

'Evil? Isn't that a little theatrical?'

'There is something very wrong here, Ailla. I think your friend Koschei probably knows that too.'

Captain Gillian Sherwin didn't appreciate being woken in the middle of her sleeping shift, and wasn't in as bubbly a mood as usual when she met Hathaway and Tippett in the computer core. A number of overalled technicians were busy pulling out bits of circuitry and checking over every connection. 'We don't seem to have an imminent core breach, so what's so urgent?' Her brain just wasn't up to being cheerful yet, not without stronger coffee.

'It's Ipthiss and the Xarax, Captain,' Hathaway said. Sherwin had been surprised to see him still up at this hour, and his olive skin was paler than usual from lack of sleep.

'What about them?'

'They're gone. Ipthiss and all the Xarax are missing. At first I thought it was just the one with the busted leg, but when we went to check on the others, they were all gone too.'

'Whoa, wait.' She tried to imagine having drunk some strong Turk-ish coffee in an effort to fool her brain into waking up fully. 'Are you telling me that a Terileptil and several full-grown Xarax have just walked off the ship and nobody has noticed?'

'Yes.'

'OK.' This was a problem, then, and that was enough to make her more alert. 'Have you scanned the ship for Xarax life-signs?'

Hathaway nodded. ‘There’s nothing, and none of the hatches have been opened, according to their operating logs. I was wondering if they could have been transmatted away.’

Sherwin shook her head. ‘I’ve had the shields programmed to raise automatically and sound the alarm if anybody tries an unauthorized transmat to or from here.’ She nodded towards the busy technicians.

‘What’s up with the computer?’

‘It may have been tampered with,’ Tippett admitted. ‘It denies having any knowledge of the Xarax species, or their presence aboard. It also seems to think I’m chief engineer.’

‘Until Ipthiss turns up, you’ are.’ Sherwin grimaced.

She didn’t much like computers. They were like dentists – useful in their own way, but a bloody pain all the same. ‘All right. Look, ah, have the stewards search the ship visually, just in case the computer being off-colour has screwed up the sensor readings. Restrict access to engineering and the computer core – the usual drill – and let me know what the diagnostics come up with.’

Ailla was surprised by the Doctor’s way of behaving, though it was quite endearing somehow. Whereas she had used the computer to try to break the code or language in which Gothard’s records were maintained, the Doctor had been scribbling on any pieces of paper he could find, and even on a couple of spots on the walls and floor. Meanwhile, she had agreed to access the colony’s more public records, at his suggestion that they might provide some clues. First, though, she was more concerned about being discovered by the Imperials. ‘Were you seen coming here?’

‘Oh, I don’t really know,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘Possibly.’

‘I’ll consider that a yes.’ She moved to the console. ‘Instead of waiting for Koschei to come back – and maybe walk into an ambush –

we’ll get a little closer.’ She made a few keystrokes on a panel, and the central column rose and fell briefly. ‘There we go. Now, what exactly am I looking for?’

The Doctor looked up from fitting together several pieces of mismatched paper on the floor. Koschei would have a fit if she suggested 121

working in such a manner, and she wondered why the Doctor travelled. Obviously he wasn't quite such a scholar as Koschei. 'If you can work back through the population records to the original colonists, their professions might give some idea of why they came here.'

'You mean if they were all miners, then they could be looking for minerals?'

'Exactly, though I doubt that it was anything quite so mundane.'

She found her way into the records with ease. The system here was more primitive than that on the *Piri Reis*. There was a database of the population, but it seemed to be just a current one, since Gothard and Terrell were listed as prominent citizens. 'There doesn't seem to be any past census. Maybe they just overwrite.'

The Doctor stood up and came over. 'Are you sure?'

'I know it doesn't sound much like standard Imperial pen-pushing, but. . . This isn't really a standard colony.'

'No, it isn't, is it? What about a registrar's database – of births and deaths?'

She skipped through more file trees. 'I can't find much of a registry. There are some marriage records, less than a hundred death certificates. . . ' She sat back, her brows knitted. 'No birth registry.'

She shook her head. 'But surely people must be born. I mean, if the colony's been here for three hundred-odd years, there must have been – what? – six or seven generations born to maintain it until the present.'

The Doctor paced at a safe distance. 'Yes. . . Well, there are one or two possible answers to that. You say that Captain Sherwin's people don't know why the Empire came out here?'

'No one does. Not the Federation, not Koschei, and certainly not me.'

The Doctor watched the scanner, chewing on a fingernail. 'The search for the fountain of youth has long been a human obsession.

They have a drive to find immortality.' He turned back. 'I wonder if that's what they were looking for here.'

‘The secret of immortality? The philosopher’s stone? It’s a myth, Doctor, not real.’

‘Well yes, but then where did these people come from if there have been no children? Either they’ve been here for three and a half centuries, or –’

‘They could be clones, I suppose.’

The Doctor looked exaggeratedly thoughtful. ‘It’s possible. Are there any records for cloning banks?’

‘None.’

‘I wonder. . . If there really haven’t been any children born here, then these must be the original colonists.’

‘That’s impossible. No human lives so long.’

‘Not ordinarily, but perhaps with help. . . Both our TARDISes came through some sort of time distortion here. If that was some kind of temporal stasis field. . . ’

Ailla thought about this. ‘It would explain why the expedition never returned, if they could only get the benefits by remaining here.’ She shook her head. ‘There would be no point to living an immortal life out here. Talk about a fate worse than death. . . ’

Victoria was feeling at a loose end. The Doctor and Ailla were working by the computers on the other side of the cylinders that divided the console room, and Jamie had typically fallen asleep in a chair. She was also surprised at how jarring the TARDIS’s internal hum was after she’d got used to the constant rushing sound of rain.

It was so typical of their travels, that she ended up left to her own devices in a strange time and place. What could she do that was useful here? She wasn’t brawny like Jamie, and didn’t have the scientific understanding of a future girl like Ailla.

In her head, she knew that she was only feeling this way because of the trouble that had assailed them here but in her heart she still felt at that loose end. She had learnt some things though, such as how to recognize some of the TARDIS’s instruments. Even here in this still more advanced machine, she could identify the scanner switch.

She activated it idly, and saw that they were now sitting between two other flyers at the comer of a huge pyramid.

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They were not alone, however. Terrell and Brandauer were marching away from one of the neighbouring flyers. To Victoria s surprise, she could hear the sounds of their movements, which seemed to be another sign of this TARDIS's more advanced nature. 'Has the Doctor's pod been recovered?' Terrell was asking.

'Yes, sir. The exterior appears to be wood, but isn't – obviously it's an attempt to disguise its true nature.'

'In that,' Terrell said dryly, 'it works well. Still, if it is a time machine of some kind, then perhaps some components will be compatible with. . . ' His voice faded as they disappeared round the comer.

That was most infuriating – they might even have said where the TARDIS was to be kept. Victoria saw her chance to have something to do. After all, hadn't she disguised herself as a Menoptera to try to rescue the Doctor and Jamie before? If she could follow them closely enough to overhear their conversation, she might find out something useful.

She glanced over at Jamie, considering rousing him. She decided against it. He would protest at her endangering herself, and that would attract the Doctor's attention. Besides, she didn't need him simply for eavesdropping, did she? This TARDIS's door control was the same as that in the Doctor's machine, and she found it easily.

The doors opened with a soft hum, but didn't alert the others. She slipped out of Koschei's TARDIS, and ducked down behind it. She had been feeling that she had to do something, or she might go mad. She wasn't a child any more.

She flitted between the parked flyers, then pressed herself against the wall. Although no one was shooting at her, Victoria knew that she would be in danger if anyone saw her. Despite that less than cheery thought, she found the outing quite exhilarating, and began to wonder if this was why Jamie was so tolerant of the situations they found themselves in. There was something pleasing and warming about having passed safely through a known danger.

Brandauer and Terrell were a short distance ahead and climbing up the pyramid's side, when Victoria followed them. She strained to hear

what they were saying, ‘Why leave it here?’ Brandauer was asking.

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‘Vacano can run some cables up if necessary. Even if the technologies aren’t compatible, it may have separate uses once he determines how it works.’ He looked up at the sky, towards the distant specks that Victoria couldn’t see but knew were there. ‘Anyway, it’s time.’

‘Isn’t everything?’ They turned, and went into the rock depression, rapidly sinking from sight. She was quite surprised at herself for feeling so brave. She knew that fear bred, but she hadn’t realized that courage bred too.

Jamie woke with a start as the Doctor began another rather tuneless recital on his recorder. ‘Ye’ve got the answer then?’

‘Only to the professions of the people here. Most of them are Naval personnel, then Adjudicators, engineers and archaeologists. It’s rather an odd mixture.’ He looked around as Ailla came back, studying a long printout that trailed across the floor. ‘Where’s Victoria?’

Jamie shrugged. ‘Maybe she got hungry.’

‘She could easily get lost in a strange TARDIS.’

Ailla looked up. ‘I’ll check.’ She consulted an instrument on one of the console panels. ‘She’s not here.’

‘What?’ The Doctor pocketed his recorder and peered at the panel.

Jamie got up, suddenly wide awake.

‘There are only the three of us in the TARDIS.’

‘But then she must have gone outside!’ The Doctor turned the scanner on. There was no sign of Victoria, and there were no other buildings nearby to which she could have gone. There were some lights at the top of the pyramid.

‘She must have gone up there,’ Jamie said.

The Doctor looked at the display uncertainly. ‘I suppose so. . . And you let her?’

‘I was asleep,’ Jamie protested.

‘Well, yes, but. . . Losing Victoria once might be considered misfortune, but twice smacks of carelessness, Jaime!’

Jamie was about to protest his innocence, but froze. There was a strange layer of shimmering greyness descending from the ceiling.

‘Doctor, look!’

The Doctor looked up, his mouth dropping into an ‘O’ of alarm, as Ailla quickly scanned the read-outs on the console. ‘Quickly, Jamie, outside!’

‘But what –’ Before Jamie could either finish his sentence, or move to the door, the tide of shimmering non-light had flashed past them and sunk below the floor. He looked down at himself, and saw that he seemed unharmed. The Doctor didn’t look any different either, even though he was patting himself down to be sure. ‘What was that?’

Ailla looked up from the console. ‘Temporal distortion wave, definitely. It was the same thing we encountered on our way here.’

‘So did we,’ the Doctor told her.

Jamie nodded in agreement. ‘It’s followed us here. . . But the thing in the TARDIS was just. . . ’ Jamie tried to think of a suitable description. ‘It was clear, like the ripples on the ground in summer.’

‘Like a heat haze, yes. I think its opacity this time is a sign that it’s more compressed here.’ The Doctor jumped, almost hopping with excitement as his face lit up. ‘Of course! We first saw it out in space yesterday. Today it’s more compressed, but there are very few things that collapse inwards like that, and it wasn’t any of them, so it must be expanding outwards.’

Jamie tried to follow this. One thing he did know was that things which expanded got bigger, not smaller. ‘But how can it be? You just said it was more compressed here and now.’

‘I think it’s expanding backward in time, Jamie. That’s why it appears to shrink, because our perception of time runs forward.’ Jamie looked as blank as his mind felt. ‘It’s like. . . like a film running backward.’

That made more sense – film hadn’t been invented in Jamie’s time, but he had seen it work on their journeys to other times. ‘Then what

caused it?'

'I don't know. In fact, if it is running backward in time, its cause may not have happened yet.' The Doctor frowned. 'I wonder. . . Did you get a fix on its course?'

'Yes.' She tore off a strip of printout and handed it to him.

'As I thought. . . Come along, Jamie.' He operated the door control.

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'Where to?'

'The TARDIS. If we can get a reading on that distortion wave from a second location, we can calculate the source.' His face lit up. 'In fact, if we can get ahead of it, we might be able to get to wherever it is –

before whatever it is happens!'

When Terrell was six or seven, his father had taken him to the Pontenese shipyards, where an old Victory-class destroyer was undergoing a refit. The young Vernon Terrell had been awed at the sight of the city-sized ship in its cocoon of work platforms, and for the first time understood why people in past centuries built religions out of the forces they saw.

For many years he had wanted to command such a ship, before fate led him into a profession he was more suited to. Nevertheless, he had always retained that sense of wonder, a feeling of being humbled by the sheer scale of the construction.

Every time he visited the Darkheart itself, though he had been down here most days for longer than he cared to remember, he felt the same frightening – but somehow thrilling – sense of amazement. He and Brandauer walked between the mile-high coolant pipes, towards the amphitheatre annexe of a control room.

Imperial generators and consoles were hidden in the shadows around the walls, and the green lens of a Veltrochni quantum lance was suspended amidst the monoliths on the amphitheatre's floor to give the whole control area the tint of rotting meat.

Vacano was checking the readings on a console that had been set up next to a cluster of smaller monoliths which huddled on the floor beneath the glimmering sky. These smooth rocks were of the deepest

gleaming jet. They were like extrusions of smooth oil rather than rock, but if one looked deep enough within them, tiny flickers of gold could be seen for fleeting instants. They had always flickered like that, ever since the Empire first arrived here in response to the legends of a dozen forgotten races.

Vacano came over. ‘Sir, I’ve made the modifications.’ Terrell nodded, trying to return his mind to the present, and leave out the 127

thoughts of Pontenese battleships. A battleship was such a small thing in comparison to this, after all. ‘Excellent. Then we may begin the mission proper.’

Vacano’s watery eyes blinked. ‘Sir? We haven’t activated any other functions.’

Terrell nodded. ‘We don’t need anything else.’ The others were too narrow in their viewpoints. To them, you needed to blow things up, or threaten to, to keep order. ‘Just have Mr Lyons feed in as many tachyon polarization changes as you can.’

Vacano shrugged, and went over to the main generator. There, he turned various switches, and pressed the intercom. ‘Shaun, run up tachyon polarization as far as it’ll go.’

‘Aye, sir,’ a voice came back. Vacano then went down to the precise centre of the amphitheatre. Inside was a single monolith, split into three branches like a cactus in an ancient western. All Vacano did was touch it. Immediately it began to glow, and the golden flickers around the other monoliths became brighter and more rapid.

Satisfied, Terrell looked up. Above was a misty haze surrounding a sparkling cloud, like a churning mass of TV static. The cloud of shimmering grey roiled and billowed.

‘Now, we can do some good.’

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Ten

Thespiralstepsthatleddownfromthepyramid’sapexweremis-leading somehow. Once Victoria was below the outer wall of the pyramid, she saw that there were other steps leading up and down all around her, and mostly at bizarre angles that could surely never have been climbed.

In fact, in the shadows between staircases, she almost thought she could see a distant reflection of herself, but climbing upward. Victoria grabbed on to the handrail to avoid pitching headlong down – or up –

the steps. She wasn't sure which, and the confusion was disorientating enough to make her quite dizzy. When she looked back – was it up? –

at the door through which she had entered, it seemed to be a flat pit opened in the floor.

She steadied herself against the railing and closed her eyes. This was intolerable – now it felt as if she was ascending the steps! She told herself not to be silly. If she felt she was ascending, then she was ascending, and her eyes must be playing tricks on her. Done with mirrors, probably. She supposed that the Doctor would have a reasonable explanation, and wished he was here to give it.

After what seemed like hours, though it was probably only ten minutes or so, she stumbled when the next step wasn't there. Wincing, she opened her eyes, and found herself to be on a hilltop. The smooth dark floor dropped away in a perfect curve on every side, as if she was standing atop a gigantic sphere. A narrow cutting led down the hillside. Strangely, there were no stars here. Instead, the sky was just an expanse of grey fuzz, like overcast on a misty day. Quite normal, really, so Victoria couldn't help feeling a faint sense of relief Although the wintry light was not unlike that of her sceptred isle, there was an oppressive heat that reminded her that she had descended quite far. She had been here only a few minutes, and already 129

she could feel uncomfortable sweat glistening on her forehead, and beading on the hairs beneath her arms.

Peeking round the comer to make sure no one was waiting for her, she edged into the canyon that led downward. There was no sign of Terrell and the other Imperial officers, so she paused to listen for their footfalls. There did seem to be a regular rhythm, like steps, off to her left, but it was masked by something else. It was a constant sound of whispering in the air, like echoes of things heard in a dream, and Victoria had to continually check herself from looking round to see who was speaking. She wasn't even sure the whispers were words, and she certainly couldn't recognize anything, though the patterns of sibilants and rises and falls in tone and pitch suggested some sort of speech.

Victoria continued her trek through the canyon under the grey sky.

She could still hear those booted footsteps from somewhere, and the jingling of equipment. Alleyways and trenches opened up frequently on either side of this canyon, some covered by roofs of the same material, and some open to the air. The acoustics generated by these openings made it impossible to judge from how close or how far the sounds originated.

The floor and walls of the canyon looked like smooth gunmetal, and were faintly metallic to the touch, too. It was far denser, though, like bedrock, but even Victoria could tell that it wasn't actual rock. Some sort of raw ore, she thought. Her father and his partner Theodore Maxtible had often brought home chunks of iron ore and the like for their experiments, and this had that same indefinable quality.

The identification of such things was quite beyond the purview of a young lady, though, and so Victoria had no idea what sort of ore it might be. She noticed, however, that there was no real edge between the floor and the walls. Instead, the floor gently curved up to become the beginnings of the walls. It was as if the landscape was moulded from a single huge sheet of ore, or the floors had been carved down from the tops of the walls.

Strangely, although she had been walking for several minutes, she didn't feel as if she were going downhill. Even stranger, she always

seemed to be at the top of a hill, while the scenery appeared to be moving around her.

Victoria wasn't so absorbed in her exploration that she couldn't hear the approach of the booted feet, though, and she wondered which way she should go to watch whoever it was from the safety of a hiding place. They could be coming from any of the other paths and openings.

A hand suddenly clamped over her mouth, and her heart jumped into her throat as she was pulled back into the shadows of a short dead-end. Victoria tried to pull away, but her captor's grip was firm and immovable. 'Stop that,' a mellifluous voice hissed in her ear. She froze involuntarily. A moment later, two armed and armoured Adjudicators walked past the opening to the little alleyway. They passed without looking round, as did Terrell, Brandauer and another couple of men she didn't recognize.

The hands vanished from around Victoria, and she stepped away,

turning to see who was there. It was a man with sallow yet distinguished – almost aristocratic – features, and a neatly trimmed beard which was grey at the corners. Victoria wanted to move further away, but there was the ever-present threat of those Adjudicators, and this stranger had dark eyes, tinted with golden flecks that seemed to com-pel her to stay. He didn't seem bothered by the humidity. He smiled, those dark eyes softening and becoming warmer, and spread his hands apologetically. 'You must forgive my somewhat melodramatic actions, Miss Waterfield, but I fear those Adjudicators wouldn't have your best interests at heart.'

'Who are you?'

His beard and pallid features gave him a

Mephistophelean appearance that was quite appropriate in this heat, but his smile and politeness gave him a less infernal air of warmth.

Whoever he was, Victoria could see that he was obviously a gentleman.

He took her hand with a slight bow, and kissed it. 'We met briefly at the reception, but we haven't been properly introduced, have we? I am Koschei; I believe you've already met my friend Ailla, and perhaps the Doctor has mentioned me.'

Victoria was rather taken aback. She had travelled in the future with the Doctor for some time now, but it was extremely rare that she encountered anyone who behaved as gentlemanly as this man. 'When Ailla said she was with you, the Doctor thought you were hunting him.'

Koschei raised his eyebrows. 'Goodness, no. It's an understandable fear, of course.' He lowered his voice conspiratorially. 'Many of our people consider the Doctor something of a reprobate, you know.'

'A reprobate?' Victoria couldn't believe it. The Doctor was certainly distrustful of authority at times, and occasionally even irresponsible, but somehow he made it an endearing feature.

'Oh yes,' Koschei said solemnly. 'He has a tendency to, ah, get involved, you see. That's not really considered proper.'

'But what about you? Aren't you getting "involved" here?'

Koschei conceded the point with a gracious nod. ‘It seems my hypocrisy knows no bounds.’

Victoria stifled a giggle. ‘You’re very like him in some ways.’

Koschei stroked his beard thoughtfully. ‘In many ways, Miss Waterfield.’ His face took on a more sombre expression. ‘What are you doing down here? Surely the Doctor didn’t send you?’

She shook her head. ‘I followed that Mr Terrell. He’s up to no good, I can feel it.’

Koschei nodded. ‘Your insight does you credit, Miss Waterfield. If I am correct, the Adjudicator In Extremis is most certainly up to – as you put it – no good. As a matter of fact, I’ve been watching him for some time now.’

‘What has he been doing?’

‘Now that they’ve gone, I will show you. This way.’

The Doctor and Jamie paused at the edge of an open area in front of the pyramid. Jamie pointed. ‘They’re bringing the TARDIS, up at the top.’ Sure enough, the TARDIS was being lowered on to the pyramid’s apex by a flyer.

The Doctor pulled him back behind a parked flyer. ‘Yes, and there are people up there too.’ They seemed to be waiting with sensors and 132

cables.

‘Victoria?’ He hoped so, but then thought otherwise, as it didn’t bode well if there were Imperials with her.

‘No, I don’t think so. It’s too far to tell for sure, but they all seem to have uniforms.’ Up at the pyramid’s apex, the uniformed figures were gesticulating towards the TARDIS, and then back down inside the pyramid. Jamie began to wonder if they were planning to carry the TARDIS inside. In the end, though, they started trooping down the slope towards the parked flyers. The flyer that had delivered the TARDIS flew off The Doctor followed it with his gaze.

Jamie was more concerned with a more immediate danger. ‘Doctor, look.’ The rest of the uniformed figures were coming towards the flyer they were hiding behind.

‘Oh crumbs.’ The Doctor looked furtively for a hiding place, then pointed towards a low bunker. ‘That shield generator.’ Jamie needed no more urging to dash across, the Doctor bounding along at his heels.

They flattened themselves against the wall of the shield-generator bunker the merest instant before the guards and technicians came into their line of sight.

The flyer soon lifted off, and the guards resumed their patrol. Jamie was relieved, and they both peeked round at the guards. ‘If we run while they’re round the far corner –’ they both said together. ‘Great minds think alike,’ Jamie said proudly.

‘And fools seldom differ.’

‘Aha!’ Jamie nodded triumphantly.

‘Oh, obviously that didn’t come out right, did it?’ The Doctor looked at the guards again. ‘Come on, now’s our chance.’ They both darted across to the pyramid, and made a spiral ascent. By the time they reached the top, the Doctor was quite flushed, but Jamie couldn’t see why. ‘Now I know what Hannibal’s elephants felt like.’

‘Och, this is just a wee brae. We’ve got to get down inside there.

Victoria could be hurt.’

‘And the temporal interference seems to be coming from inside.’ As they descended the steps, Jamie felt a faint sense of vertigo, as if he was walking along the top of a mountain in the fog, knowing that a

cliff edge was near, but not knowing exactly where. ‘Here, Doctor, are we going up or down?’

‘I’m not sure. Of course, neither! This isn’t just a staircase, Jamie, it’s a dimensional bridge!’

‘Eh?’

‘When you go in or out of the TARDIS, you step between the real world and the TARDIS’s relative dimension. This is just the same thing, but on a different scale, so we take lots of steps to get through it.’

‘Does that make sense?’

‘Well it does to me, Jamie.’

‘Ah, that’s all right then.’ If the Doctor was sure about it, that was good enough for Jamie. Somehow that faith made the rest of the trip pass more easily.

Koschei had led Victoria to a short flight of steps that led up on to the wall. Both of them were moving on automatic pilot, as they gazed at the sight before them. Victoria could understand his transfixion, as she too looked about her in awe. In all her travels with the Doctor, she had never seen anything like this.

The landscape spread out below her was almost entirely composed of huge steps of the same ore. The different heights and shapes of the steps gave the area a patchwork appearance, and it reminded Victoria of the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland. Nonetheless, the horizon still curved downward from their perpetually elevated position. The path through which she and Koschei had walked was one of myriad black lines cut into the surface. The paths were everywhere, twisting in an angular maze.

Koschei pointed. ‘And there is our destination, Miss Waterfield.’ She followed the line of his arm. ‘At least, I don’t see anywhere else nearby that seems particularly significant.’ He was indicating an area not too far off, where an impossibly huge forest of arched tubes and pipes looped around a gunmetal amphitheatre.

As they neared the edge, Victoria could see that the far side was at least a mile or two away. Gargantuan pipes and pillars looped 134

hundreds of yards into the air before plunging back into the ground.

Directly above was a strangely pulsating grey nothingness. It wasn’t really light or dark, but the total absence of either.

There was a sound, too, a very faint pulsing, mixed with static and screams and music and a host of noises she couldn’t identify. It was like a storm a long way off. ‘What is that noise?’

Koschei regarded the grey mass thoughtfully. ‘That, Miss Waterfield, is the thunderous sound of butterflies being trampled.’

The Doctor stepped away from the stairs, and nodded to himself as if this was what he was expecting. Jamie was a little more baffled. They seemed to be on a hilltop, and were somehow at the top of the stairs they had been descending.

There was a narrow alleyway leading out, but the Doctor was ignoring it. Instead he was looking up at the indistinct grey sky. ‘Look, Jamie.’

Jamie looked up, puzzled. Surely they were underground, so how could there be a sky? ‘Have we been transported to a different world?’

The Daleks had been able to do that via a cabinet of mirrors, he recalled.

‘I’m not sure,’ the Doctor admitted hesitantly. ‘I think so, but not necessarily in the same dimension.’

‘Ah.’ Jamie nodded towards the swirling greyness. ‘It looks a bit dreich anyway.’

‘Oh those aren’t rainclouds, Jamie. As a matter of fact I don’t think that’s cloud or mist at all.’ He took out the time-path indicator, and adjusted its setting. The light on it came on permanently. ‘Oh dear.’

Victoria followed Koschei through the network of mile-high coolant pipes. It was like walking through a half-scale city, where the buildings were too small to accommodate the people, but were still large enough to dwarf Victoria and Koschei.

She guessed that the smallest of the monoliths on the floor was perhaps twenty feet high, with several being nearer a hundred. Some

of the gaps between them were wide avenues, while others were just a few inches.

She noticed, though, that the monoliths weren’t the same substance as the rest of this strange land. They were a deep obsidian, with sparkling hints of gold and emerald entombed within. ‘What are these things?’ She wished the Doctor were here – he always seemed to have an answer to every problem, though the constant problems were becoming very wearying.

Even more bizarre was the fact that when she stood in the exact centre of the amphitheatre, she still seemed to be on a hilltop. From here, the huge pipes all leant away from her, while little wheeled trolleys were strangely immobile even though they seemed to be on steep slopes. ‘What is this place?’

Koschei studied one monolith from a few feet away, hands behind his back. ‘I must confess, I am not entirely certain. It’s obviously of some

importance, though.'

'Well it's the only thing here at all.'

'Precisely, my dear.' He stroked his beard absently. 'If Ailla had decoded those files, they might be able to tell us what all this is. You've seen her recently?'

'She was still working on the files, but she and the Doctor have found that there are no birth records for this whole world. The Doctor thinks that the people here are the same ones who came to this world hundreds of years ago.'

She had expected him to scoff, but he merely nodded. 'I suspected as much when I saw that.' He gestured towards the misty sky outside.

'The sky?'

'Oh, that isn't just a sky. That is what you can see of Time itself.'

Jamie winced at the thought of how many guards might hear, as the Doctor attacked the wall of the canyon with a small hammer and chisel. 'Doctor, what are ye doing?'

'Oh, I just thought I'd try to get a sample of this. . . ' He looked at the wall with an air of surprised confusion as it resisted the chisel totally. 'Well, this whatever it is.' He handed the hammer and chisel 136

to Jamie. 'Put these away will you, there's a good fellow.' He took out a stethoscope, and pressed the end to the wall. 'Fascinating. . . '

Jamie hefted the tools, wondering what he was supposed to do with them, and finally settled for slipping them back into the Doctor's pocket while he had his eyes closed to listen. 'D'ye hear anything?'

'Not quite, but almost.' His face was a mask of puzzlement. 'It's as if there's something somewhere, but just out of range of hearing. It's like trying to listen to something on the far side of a noisy room while wearing earplugs and mufflers.'

Victoria brushed her hand against the smooth surface of one of the obsidian monoliths. She had expected it to be cold to the touch, but it was merely cool. Sparkles danced around the spot her fingers had touched. It was quite an enchanting sight, as if tiny fireflies were whirling in a fairy ring.

Koschei, meanwhile, had stopped under a green convex lens that was mounted between the centremost of the huge blocks. He examined it closely, then went over to a three-branched monolith of what looked like mother-of-pearl. It was casting a faint but noticeable glow that lent a pale light to the floor outside.

Victoria thought it was one of the most beautiful sights she had ever seen. 'What is it?' she breathed.

'I believe it is a time-flow analogue.' He pointed to the three sections. 'Past, present and future.' He watched it grimly, not stepping close enough to touch it. 'It must very precisely balance the energy that is controlled from those.' He gestured towards the jet monoliths.

Victoria hastily stepped back from the monolith. 'What does it do?'

'It doesn't do anything. It merely is. Think of it as a sort of carrier frequency for transmitting energy along or through. This is obviously the culprit that drew both of our TARDISes to this planet.'

'That thing?'

'Not this monolith literally, no, but this complex, the real Darkheart, I presume. All that you see around you here is linked to this analogue.'

Koschei moved to examine a nearby Imperial console. 'That's very strange: this is a medical computer from a starship's infirmary.'

Victoria was curious in spite of the awesome scale of her surroundings. 'Why put medical equipment in here?'

Koschei merely cocked an eyebrow. 'It's feeding a diagnostic cycle attuned to the colonists' morphogenetic resonance into this time-flow analogue. Did you say that the Doctor believes the people here are still the original colonists from three and a half centuries ago?'

'That's right. He wondered if that's why they came here, looking for immortality.' Victoria was both amazed and frightened at the thought of finding immortality. On the one hand, it was such an astounding leap for humanity, but she had always suspected that the most frightening thing about the prospect of death was its permanency. Surely it was the infinity of death that was most frightening, but equally the infinity of immortal life would be just as fearsome.

Koschei nodded, and tapped the console with his fingertips. ‘That is exactly what this Darkheart is being used for. It is drawing energy from the space/time vortex –’ he nodded towards the heart of the greyness’– to maintain a temporal stasis of the human morphogenetic fields here, so that no ageing can take place.’

The Doctor and Jamie had reached the steps up on to the top of the alley walls. The Doctor hopped up with surprising agility, and frowned up at the swirling static. ‘Oh, I say. I’ve never seen anything quite like that before. . . ’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Of course!’

Jamie didn’t like the looks of this place at all. ‘What?’

The lines on the Doctor’s face deepened. ‘Jamie, don’t think this is a planet at all!’

‘How d’ye mean?’

‘A planet would be too fragile to survive the supernova that created a neutron star. Not this close, anyway. Those dead planets on the fringes of the system are far enough out to have survived, but are lifeless anyway. I think this stuff here –’ he knelt to rap on the ore with his knuckles’– is dwarf-star material. This so-called planet is a bubble of neutron-star material that’s somehow been flung off into space, and the thin but dense skin of the bubble has cooled into a solid shell.’

‘Ye mean we’re inside the sun?’

‘Quite. Well, not quite. The neutron star and the planet are the same object, but the planet – or what we all thought was a planet –

is merely a part of the star’s mass on the other end of a dimensional bridge. That way they can have a body of black-hole density without it actually becoming a black hole, because its mass is divided by that dimensional bridge. And that up there –’ he pointed at the roiling grey mass’– is the event horizon.’ Jamie, unsurprisingly, looked blank. ‘It’s sort of a beach, Jamie, but instead of being at the edge of the sea, it’s at the edge of Time.’

‘Congratulations,’ a rich and charming voice said from behind them.

‘I doubt I could have put it any better myself’ Jamie and the Doctor turned. A saturnine bearded figure in an immaculate suit was standing there, leaning against the side of a higher outcrop of the metallic ore.

Though no taller than the Doctor, his compact build gave him an unmistakable air of power. He smiled slowly. ‘Why Doctor, whatever are you doing in such a nasty place?’

Eleven

OutintheendlesscoldbeyondthelastoftheDarkheartsystem’s dead worlds, an infinitesimal speck coasted amidst the nothing. Its insectile segments almost undetectable in the vast emptiness, the Veltrochni Dragon *Zathakh* moved serenely. Brokhyth hadn’t even bothered to deploy the solar wings, so far out were they from any reasonable source of energy. ‘What is out here?’

‘A semi-detached binary system,’ Koskhoth reported faithfully.

‘There are five dead planets in distant orbits, but the human colony is quite close in. We’re reading one major concentration of life-forms and artificial energy patterns. There are several atmospheric processors dotted around the planet.’

‘Any sign of Pack Huthakh, or wreckage?’

‘Not from this distance.’

‘No. . . ’ Going any closer would alert the humans to their presence, and as yet she didn’t know whether that would be good or bad. It depended on whether the humans here were going to be friends or enemies. ‘Launch a probe with passive sensors only, and have it make a loop through the system, scanning for signs of wreckage or weapons-fire residue.’

‘I’m configuring a probe now.’ There was a dull thud from some deck below, and a bright speck flashed away from the ship. ‘It’s away.’

Brokhyth had never actually had many dealings with humans, and in fact had never encountered the loss of a single ship, let alone an entire Pack. It was so easy to look at the history of events a thousand years ago, when a whole generation of every Pack was wiped out by the Tzun Confederacy, and not feel anything for the loss. Not when it was so long ago.

Now it was different. True, there had been fewer casualties – only the few hundred members of one small Pack – but it was more im-141

mediate, more painful. Pack Huthakh was one of the younger Packs.

Made up of family members from three other Packs, including Pack Zanchyth, they had only recently been granted true independent Pack status within the overarching House that contained those three Packs.

Curious, how she automatically thought about the mystery in terms of enemy action. That was the purpose of a warrior, of course.

A thousand years ago, however, Veltroch had been her people's true home, and the Tzun's action was a blow to the entire species. Then, every Pack had unified to hit back before more damage could be done, and destroyed the Confederacy, sending the few survivors scuttling for cover under the protection of other spacefaring powers. Then the Empire had risen, its human members spreading through the Galaxy like a cancer. Far too many Veltrochni, grown fearful after centuries of solitude, had left their homeworld for fear of annexation. Now, with more than half the Packs having adapted to a nomadic life wandering through the Cosmos, a fleet like that which conducted the holy war against the Tzun was but an idle dream.

These days, if anyone was to be punished or neutralized in this sector, it was up to a few solitary Dragons like hers. Not that it mattered; a thousand years ago they had destroyed those who had killed their children – but at what cost! No Veltrochni would admit to any sympathy for what had happened to the Tzun, but many of those Tzun worlds had been occupied by the Confederacy's other victims, who had been absorbed into their empire. They all died too, when Veltrochni Dragons carved up their worlds with their quantum lances.

Many Veltrochni had felt that they had become as bad as the Tzun for that, and that was why they chose to flee the encroaching Earth Empire rather than follow the same path. Brokhyth herself had never really made up her mind. The killers of her species' children deserved all they got, but. . . Innocents shouldn't die in the process.

That much was the same here, she felt. If the humans here had been involved in the loss of the colony, she would see that they were suitably executed. The innocent bystanders would not. If there were any innocents, of course, and that was by no means certain.

'Pack-Mother,' Koskhoth said sharply from the far end of the crew's

work pit. 'I am detecting very thin traces of materials used in Dragon hulls, and residual radiation signatures from some kind of energy

weapon.'

'Hail Veltroch on hyperlink. I would speak with the Council.'

The Doctor shifted uncomfortably, and Jamie tensed, ready to spring.

Whoever this was, the Doctor was obviously worried by him. The newcomer spread his hands. 'I assure you I'm not here to take you home.'

'It is you,' the Doctor breathed. He suddenly beamed, and hurried over, shaking Koschei's hand furiously in both of his own. A bemused Jamie followed him over, not knowing where else to go.

'It has been a long time, Doctor, but I seem to manage. What brings you here, anyway?'

'Oh, we landed here quite by chance. We were just passing, when some sort of temporal distortion passed through the TARDIS –'

Koschei stifled a laugh. 'Do you mean to tell me that you still haven't learnt to control that obsolete TARDIS of yours properly?' He shook his head pityingly. 'That's what you get for constantly fiddling about with modifications.'

The Doctor defensively puffed himself up to full height. 'Well it's easier for you, you've got a Type 45 with user-definable macros for navigation. Some of us have to do it the old-fashioned way!'

Koschei tilted his head. 'You should have taken a newer model.'

'Newer isn't necessarily better, Koschei. I happen to prefer tried and trusted –' Jamie coughed violently. The TARDIS's mechanisms were more trying than tried, and anything but trusted. The Doctor glared him into silence. 'Tried and trusted mechanisms. Anyway, what's your excuse?'

'Oh, also a temporal distortion that drew my TARDIS off course.

Presumably the same distortion that affected you.'

Jamie had finally had enough of being talked around. 'Aren't ye going to introduce me, Doctor?'

The Doctor looked at him guiltily, then beamed again. 'Oh, but of course,' he enthused. 'This is, er, Koschei, one of my oldest and

dearest friends. We were at. . . school together, you see. Koschei, this is James Robert McCrimmon. He and Victoria Waterfield travel with me these days.'

'Yes, the charming Miss Waterfield is just back there.' He pointed towards a trench in the ground. 'Likewise, I gather you have met my friend Ailla.'

'Yes. As a matter of fact, your TARDIS is just outside the pyramid now. Where did Victoria say that girl was from?'

'Earth in the twenty-eighth century,' Koschei supplied helpfully. 'She has the greatest computer skills you could hope to see. Very useful in situations like this.'

'Yes. . . That's something I'd been meaning to ask: they allow you to wander around like this?'

'Do I detect a hint of jealousy, Doctor?' Koschei shrugged. 'They've never said anything untoward to me.' He looked back at the distant amphitheatre, which seemed to curve around the hilltop they were on. 'If my TARDIS is just outside, perhaps that is more useful. If you will excuse me, I'll leave you to rejoin Miss Waterfield.'

Victoria was exploring amidst the huge coolant pipes, since she was afraid to touch any of the consoles or even the monoliths for fear of what effect it might have. Voices were echoing strangely from the smooth curved walls, and she looked for a place to hide, until she realized that one of the voices had a distinct Scottish accent.

Since all of the Imperials had a strange accent of their own, there was only one person it could be, and she raced back to the main hall to find the Doctor and Jamie coming round the comer. 'It's like a castle inside out,' Jamie was saying.

'Or a planet inside out. Victoria!' They both came over. 'You really should have stayed in Koschei's TARDIS, you know.'

'Yes, I know, but I thought you would want to know what that Terrell was up to. I thought that if I could find out –'

'And have you?'

'Koschei says that this Darkheart place is keeping the colonists immortal.'

The Doctor nodded understandingly. ‘I suspected as much.’ He went over to the pearlescent structure that Koschei had called a time-flow analogue. ‘This is certainly some kind of temporal stasis. . . ’ The Doctor poked at the monolith, watching as ripples of light spread out from where his fingers touched it. ‘I’ve never seen anything on quite this sort of scale, though.’

Victoria wondered whether she should pull the Doctor’s hand away from the smooth ore. ‘Doctor, be careful. Koschei said this was very precisely balanced.’

‘Did he?’ The Doctor cleared his throat. ‘Well, he’s always been a terrible old fusspot, you know; he doesn’t like to actually do anything until after he’s prepared and planned and measured and all of that sort of thing.’

Which was exactly the sort of proper preparation that Edward Waterfield had taught his daughter. ‘That sounds quite sensible to me.’

‘Yes, but really there’s no substitute for, er, you know, having a go and seeing what happens.’ He flexed his fingers and cracked his knuckles, like a pianist about to embark on a long and complicated concerto. ‘Now don’t worry, Victoria, I know what I’m doing.’

‘Then you know what this is?’

‘Oh yes.’ She looked on sceptically, and he shrugged. ‘Well, not exactly,’ he admitted, ‘but I have seen some rather similar types of thing.’

Koskhoth watched over the helmsman’s shoulder as *Zathakh* coasted towards the planet. The viewing cube on the flight console showed a bright white ship there already. Unlike the modular Imperial warships, this one had its command centre atop a short graceful neck that rose from a sculpted hull with slightly swept-back fins or wings.

Koskhoth tuned the passive sensors to its emissions. ‘Is that a Terileptil ship?’ Brokhyth asked from the command couch above him.

‘It looks like it, but the transponder signal identifies it as a survey vessel of the Galactic Federation. Shall we identify ourselves?’

Veltroch was a Federation member, though this particular vessel belonged solely to the national defence force.

‘No. Take us into orbit trailing the Federation ship by a hundred kilometres. That way any energy that leaks through the camouflage field will be taken as energy leakage from the Federation engines.’

‘Yes, Pack-Mother.’

Ailla felt her usual relief as Koschei marched into his TARDIS, and cast an eye over the console. ‘Any luck?’

He nodded. ‘This colony is founded on top of a space/time conduit.

It’s clearly the source of the temporal interference we encountered, and is very dangerous in the wrong hands.’

‘Which are?’

‘Humanity’s for one. No offence.’ He moved round the console to a panel on which two flat metal discs were surrounded by a concentration of dials and LEDs. ‘Yes, I think these should do nicely. . . ’ He began disconnecting the two discs from the console.

‘Surely it should be destroyed, if it’s so dangerous.’

‘Perfectly correct, my dear. First, however, I must study it. Not only is it a unique opportunity for scientific research, but it isn’t particularly wise to go around interfering with such artefacts without fully understanding the consequences. Or would you prefer that humanity learnt how to operate it?’

‘Certainly not! Nobody in their right mind would want to permit that.’

‘Exac–’ Koschei broke off, his features freezing into a grim mask.

‘No. . . They wouldn’t, would they?’ He paused for a moment, then resumed disconnecting the discs. Once they were free, he slipped them into his pockets, and unclipped a set of circuits from the sockets that were now laid bare.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Preparing for study.’

Victoria had been telling Jamie all about Koschei while the Doctor experimented happily with the monoliths. ‘He saved my life,’ she finished. Jamie nodded approvingly. The Doctor, meanwhile, was sys-

tematically trying out all of the monoliths, to see which ones would

respond to the touch.

‘Doctor, what are you doing?’ Koschei was striding purposefully between the enormous blocks. ‘Don’t you realize how delicate all this equipment is?’

‘Of course I do!’ The Doctor puffed himself up, looking offended. ‘I was just having a look.’ Koschei knelt in front of the medical console, and started unfastening its maintenance hatch.

‘Then you can see how dangerous a thing like this would be in Imperial hands. It is reasonable to assume that the best thing to do would be to destroy it.’ He began removing circuits from the console.

‘Well, obviously, but how?’

‘How indeed? That is what I hope to determine from here.’

The Doctor sighed theatrically, clasping his hands together. ‘Over-research has always been your trouble.’

‘Knowledge is power, Doctor.

One can’t go tampering with a

space/time conduit without being properly prepared.’ Koschei was almost alarmed at the thought.

‘I didn’t intend to. I just thought we’d do better to simply short out its power source,’ the Doctor answered tartly.

‘I would if I knew what and where it was.’

‘Ah. That is a good point, isn’t it?’

Koschei nodded. ‘Another excellent reason for further study, from which I can discern how to set up a feedback loop.’ Victoria was quite impressed.

‘Feedback loop? On a thing of this scale?’ She didn’t really know what all these things were for, but it was obviously both important and dangerous. The Doctor and Koschei had slipped into some obscure language, but finally the Doctor shook his head and stumped over towards them.

‘Come along, you two,’ the Doctor said, and led them off The Doctor hurried on ahead, and Victoria could tell from the lack of his usual banter that he was concerned about something. ‘What was all that about?’ Jamie asked.

‘I don’t know, but they seem to be disagreeing about something.’

She wouldn’t say it to Jamie, who had a very deep loyalty to the Doc-147

tor, but it seemed to her that Koschei was the one who more precisely knew what he was doing.

They didn’t encounter any more of the technicians on the way back up – or down – the steps to the pyramid.

Terrell was painting quite happily in his plush quarters at the top of the Adjudication Lodge, when the technician’s call came through. ‘Terrell here.’

‘Sir, there may be intruders in the Darkheart.’

Terrell’s brush had hit the floor before he even realized he had dropped it. ‘Intruders? Perhaps the demon. . . ? Seal the pyramid.

I’m coming down.’

Ailla had had no more luck in her research. It had become her habit on Earth to try to relax when she hit such an obstruction, in the hope

that her mind would sort itself out while she wasn't pressuring it. That seemed to work for most people, anyway.

She was, therefore, relaxing with a strong cup of coffee, when there was a knocking at the door. A glance at the scanner showed that it was the Doctor and his companions, so she let them in. 'Have you seen Koschei?' she asked.

The Doctor nodded. 'That's who we've come to talk to you about.

He wants to try setting up a feedback loop in the Darkheart.'

'Why?' Koschei always knew what he was doing, but this seemed a bit sudden to her.

'The Darkheart is a sort of space/time conduit, designed to transmit energy through the space/time vortex, and Koschei thinks he can shut it down with a feedback loop.' The Doctor's tone was very disapproving, she noticed. She couldn't blame him. 'Actually, I was rather hoping you might be able to talk him out of it. I do hate to be contrary, and get in the way, but it seems to me that there must be safer ways to deal with the problem.'

That seemed reasonable. 'Which is?'

'Well, we don't know that either,' the Doctor admitted reluctantly.

'But if he sets up a feedback and the conduit is highly charged, it could 148

blow up in his face – and take this whole planet with it!'

Ailla considered for a moment. A space/time conduit wasn't something they had encountered before, or at least she hadn't, and if Koschei was intent on setting up a loop, she wanted to be sure he would be safe. 'All right, can you give me directions to this place? I'll talk to Koschei and see if we can work something out.'

They all left together, but while Ailla descended into the pyramid, the lights of numerous flying machines were approaching rapidly.

The Doctor unlocked his TARDIS. 'Inside, both of you. I don't fancy having to explain what we've been doing here, and I certainly want to get the TARDIS away from this place, too.'

'You mean we're going to leave?' Victoria asked. It was most unlike

the Doctor to leave a danger unresolved. Even though she herself had often wished that he would do just that, the idea that he would seemed somehow disappointing.

'Not at all. We'll just slip across to a quieter part of the city.'

'But the TARDIS isn't built for short hops,' Jamie protested. 'Ye said that yerself.'

The Doctor flicked a couple of switches experimentally. 'Well, that's true, but there is a sort of safety override, if I can remember how it works. The problem with it is that the jump is completely random, and no more than a mile or so from its present location. Now don't fuss me, Jamie. It has been an awfully long time since I tried this.' In a sudden concerted rush of activity, he turned dials and pressed switches all over the panel. 'There, I think that should do it.' Jamie was sceptical, but the central column at the heart of the console was indeed starting to rise and fall. In a few seconds, the oscillating slowed and the column sank to a halt. 'Yes, I thought as much.' The Doctor seemed pleased with himself, and operated the scanner.

The screen lit up with the image of a side street. Neon signs hung on the walls, and people were passing by at the end of the street.

The Doctor clapped with delight. 'We are still on the same planet?'

Victoria asked. The Doctor's face fell, and he gazed at her levelly.

'Of course we are. We're just back in the city, that's all.'

* * *

The first flyer landed, a pair of Adjudicators emerging rather boredly.

'They say it could be the demon,' one commented.

'Not likely. There's no one for it to kill in there.'

They began to ascend the pyramid.

Ailla had stolen a technician's overalls to get into the pyramid more easily. The descent had been disorientating, but she was quite used to the vagaries of physics, and didn't mind it at all. Once she was on the inner surface, however, even she stopped to gaze with awe on the upward-curving horizon, and the grey sky that veiled it.

Regaining her composure, she followed the line of illuminated posts that led to the trench, and swung herself into it, after taking a deep breath to steel herself Koschei was burrowed into a disembowelled console as she approached. ‘Koschei!’

Koschei straightened. ‘Ailla, what are you doing here?’

‘The Doctor sent me to make sure that you think of a better idea than setting up a feedback loop.’

He sighed. ‘The Doctor has a good brain, but isn’t well trained, Ailla.’

‘No he –’ She was cut off by a crackle of disruptor fire that tore across the consoles. Koschei and Ailla leapt in opposite directions, so as not to give the Adjudicators an easy target. Koschei was most displeased. This sort of interference was annoying, A disruptor shot blasted sparks from the monolith he was crouching beside, though it remained undamaged. Koschei replied with a snapshot and was rewarded with a scream.

There was a volley of exchanged fire from the other side of the forest of monoliths. Obviously the opposition had split up too. Koschei made his way towards the sound, and almost walked straight into another Adjudicator. He flung himself sideways, shooting quickly with his laser pistol. The Adjudicator collapsed.

A footstep sounded behind him, and Koschei turned and fired instinctively.

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There was a white flash that seemed to imprint the scene into Koschei’s retinas: the power console glowing like some sorcerous altar as Ailla was suspended before it, impaled by the laser bolt that lanced through her. In truth it lasted but a fraction of a second, and then Ailla crashed limply to the floor.

Koschei’s face drained of all colour. He crashed to his knees beside her. ‘Ailla!’

She shook slightly, charred skin cracking. ‘Don’t worry,’ she gasped through gritted teeth. Already her eyes were starting to unfocus. ‘It’s not. . . over. . . ’ It was typical of her, looking on the bright side. She was a fighter to the last. Her face contorted in pain. ‘I wanted. . . tell you I –’ her breath rattled out one last time’– you. . . ’

Disbelief segued into dismay, then pain in his expression, as Koschei's breath exhaled in an almost silent wail. It seemed to take forever, the moment interminably and unbearably frozen. He pressed his ear to her breast. There wasn't a sound. 'This is not supposed to happen.' Being characteristically thorough, he placed the heel of his hand over her heart, and tried to massage it back to life. It didn't work. No amount of pressure or pounding made a difference, and he soon sat back on his heels. This wasn't supposed to happen.

With the fingertips of his right hand, he touched the blood that ran from the comer of her mouth. It was still warm. He touched the index finger of his left hand to his own cheek, just below the tear duct. It came away dry. He leant forward, and kissed her very gently, but no breath returned from between her lips. 'Not yet,' he muttered in a harsh tone. 'This isn't over yet.'

He stood up, wiping the blood from his fingers with a silk handkerchief. Unfolding the handkerchief, Koschei laid it gently across her face, then turned and marched out of the room without a backward glance.

Twelve

SherwinglancedatthetimeyetagaIn. ItwastotallyunlikeSala-manca to be late. In fact, she wouldn't be surprised if unpunctu-ality was a capital offence on Draconia.

A tall thin black man, with the first hint of lines of wisdom developing around his eyes, came in. He wore an ID plaque pinned to his robelike clothes,, but Sherwin had never seen him before. Surely this wasn't yet another shy diplomat who'd been in hiding for the whole voyage? That was impossible. He didn't seem shy: more like an ancient Moorish prince.

The newcomer came over, and gave a slight neck-bow. 'My Lady,' he said respectfully. 'I have prepared a duty roster for the duration of our presence in this system. Commissioner Epilira, however, has concerns about –,

'Hold it right there.' She motioned to two stewards to come over.

'Now, who are you, and what are you doing on my ship?' Probably an Imperial trying to get aboard for spying purposes, she might have thought, except that he was hardly inconspicuous. Perhaps someone

who had been in prison down there, and thought that making it to a Federation ship would prevent his reincarceration.

‘What are you talking about? It’s me, Salamanca. Your first officer!’

‘My first officer is a Draconian.’ How stupid could this intruder be?

‘But of course I am.’

‘You,’ she went on, ‘are human.’

‘Yes! What is the problem? I am a man of Draconia, and always have been. My Lady, how could I not be who I say?’

‘Lock him up, Clark.’

‘Right.’ Clark nodded to the two stewards, who took the stranger by the arms.

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‘My Lady, have I offended you? Have I not pursued my duties properly?’ Clark ushered him away.

Captain Sherwin watched them go. The stranger’s story was obviously untrue but he told it with such conviction. And surely nobody could be so stupid as to mistake themselves for a member of another species, no matter how much vrax – or whatever – they were on.

There was more to this, she was certain. ‘What wouldn’t I give to have a Mentiad on board right now. Computer, where is Commander Salamanca?’

‘Deck one, section one, leaving the flight deck,’ the toneless receptionist-like voice answered.

That was impossible – Sherwin

could see that corridor from here, and only Clark, the stewards and the intruder were there. The intruder who had claimed to be Salamanca. A chilly suspicion hit her, and she went to the nearest console, powering up its screen, and entering her authorization code. ‘Display Salamanca’s personnel file.’

A picture of the intruder’s face appeared on screen, identified as Commander Salamanca. Sherwin dropped into the chair by the console, and stared almost incredulously at the display. Would an

escaped convict or psychiatric case alter the records? Would such a person even be able to?

She shut off the display, and turned back to Mei Quan. ‘Institute a shipwide search for Salamanca, and scan the planet for Draconian life signs, just in case.’ Perhaps he had been snatched away by an Imperial transmat beam. ‘When Clark gets back, have him download fresh personnel backups over the hyperlink from central records on Alpha Centauri II. I don’t like this at all.’

The heads of the Doctor, Jamie and Victoria popped round the corner of a building opposite the Adjudication

Lodge, one above the other. Armoured Adjudicators were trooping in and out relentlessly, while flyers whispered overhead.

‘Something seems to have stirred them up a little,’ the Doctor remarked.

That, Jamie felt, was an understatement. ‘Aye, us!’

Victoria, as ever, was more practical. ‘Perhaps we should contact the Federation people here. I mean, if they have been working with Koschei and Ailla. . . ’

The Doctor nodded. ‘That could be dangerous. We’ll be hunted now, because we know too much. If we directly contact any Federation personnel here, we’ll just be putting them in danger too.’

‘Oh, I see.’ She sounded dejected.

‘However, there is a transmitter in the TARDIS. If you can find your way back there, you might be able to contact their ship.’ The Doctor started hastily scribbling instructions on how to use the TARDIS’s communications equipment. ‘They may not believe you, but it’s the best we can do for now.’

Jamie wasn’t letting him off that easily. ‘You said we might try that.

What will you be doing?’

‘Oh, I shall go back to the pyramid and help Koschei deal with the Darkheart.’

‘But they’ll be waiting for ye to try something like that. At least let me

go with –'

'Now, Jamie, I know what I'm doing –' he hesitated momentarily

'– or at least I think I do.' Before Jamie could protest further, the Doctor handed Victoria the notes he had been writing. 'There, you understand what you'll have to do?'

She examined the notes briefly. 'Yes, I think so.'

'Good. Now remember to keep out of sight. And be careful.' So saying, he hurried off along the street, keeping to the shadows. Jamie desperately wanted to go after him, sure that the Doctor would need his help before long, but neither could he abandon Victoria.

'We'd better be going too,' she reminded him.

'Aye. The TARDIS is this way.' He pointed.

She laughed. 'Your memory's going. It's this way.' She pointed in the opposite direction. They exchanged determined glances.

Mei Quan's almond eyes looked at a booted Gillian Sherwin with dutiful concern. 'Captain, are you sure this is wise? We don't know who this person is – he could be an assassin, for all we know.'

'Can anyone ever really be sure of anything?' They were both in the main throughway that ran along the spine of the ship. A couple of the armed stewards who provided security under Mei Quan's direction were with them. 'I intend to find out who this man is, what he's doing here, and what he has done with Salamanca and the others.' The past few hours had confirmed her dislike for the situation, as all six Draconians had gone missing, to be replaced by humans who claimed to be the missing crew and tried to take their places on duty. It was quite bizarre.

'They must be from the planet. Even if they didn't stowaway in the shuttle coming back, the Empire used transmats, which means the colony probably still does too.

It was certainly logical, as a stowaway would have been found. 'He's hardly much of a spy, though. You'd think he would try to blend in with the maintenance crew or stewards, not impersonate an easily recognizable officer of a different species.'

‘Maybe he’s an escapee from prison or a psych-hospital.’ Either of whom would most likely try to hide like a stowaway. And why alter the ship’s personnel files?’

‘Obviously one of the others did that.’ Sherwin couldn’t help but feel that things couldn’t be so simple. There must be more to it; there always was.

They reached the door to the prisoner’s cabin very quickly, The ship didn’t have a proper brig, so the impostor had been sealed into an unused cabin. ‘Open it,’ she said.

Mei Quan put her palm to the wall’s sensor plate, and the door slid open. The intruder was sitting on the bed, staring out of the viewport at the void beyond. He looked more lost and puzzled than anything else. Sherwin went in and sat in a chair opposite, while Mei Quan stood by the door, hand near her blaster. The stewards remained outside.

‘It’s a good act,’ she said, ‘but I don’t know what you hope to gain by it. Do you still say you’re the first officer of this ship?’

He turned back from the viewport with a shrug. ‘I know who I am.

Do you still say I am not?’

‘Oh, it’s not just me.’ She switched on the cabin’s terminal. ‘Display personnel file of Commander Salamanca from central records.’ She turned the screen round to face him as the image of the proud Draconian she had known came up. He looked at it, brows knotted. ‘Who’s this? I’ve never even seen a species like this before.’

‘That is Salamanca, my Draconian First Officer.’

He snorted. ‘My Lady, someone is trying to trick you. This is some sort of alien, not a Draconian.’

‘Exactly.’ Maybe the truth would come out now.

‘Captain, how can I convince you?’ He sat, and leant forward, letting weariness show through his eyes. ‘I don’t know what’s happened to you all that has made you forget, nor do I know who has changed these records to the image of an alien, but can you not at least see that. I am being honest with you?’ It many ways, she could. His eyes

held no sign of deception, and had the clarity of reason but she knew that his claim was false. It was obvious to her that he believed what he was saying, though. In that respect, she didn't think he was lying to her. Just delusional, maybe.

Sherwin stood. 'I think you d best stay in here until we get everything sorted out.' She went to the door, and Mei Quan opened it.

'My Lady.' She looked back. He hadn't moved. 'I am sorry if I have failed in my duties. . . '

'Me too.' But probably for different reasons. The door closed behind her, and Mei Quan sealed it. Sherwin nodded to the stewards. 'Carry on; he can't trigger the door from inside.' She looked back at Mei Quan, as they started on their way back towards the flight deck. 'Any sign of Salamanca?'

'No, and no Draconian life signs on the planet, so far as we can tell.

Maybe on one of the Imperial ships. . . They're keeping their shields powered up, and we can't get good readings through them.'

They stepped on to the flight deck, Mei Quan moving straight to her tactical console to see if anything had changed. Sherwin went to the communications station, where Clark had come on duty again. 'Any sign of how the personnel files on board were altered?' At least that might give them some clue as to what was going on.

'None that I can find, Captain.' He brought up the system's access logs on screen. 'The last personnel update took place on the day we left for here.'

'But someone could cover their tracks.' One thing she did know was that no computer system was perfect, or totally secure.

'Well, I could, and Ipthiss could, but an Imperial hacker? I can't see them managing that – their systems are all three centuries out of date.

The final count has come in, though. All the alien crew members have vanished.'

'All of them?' It hardly seemed likely.

Clark nodded. 'Also, approximately a dozen human intruders have

been apprehended. All claim to be alien crew members. Finally, Koschei and Ailla have also –'

Sherwin shook her head. 'They're on the planet. Ailla said something about sounding out the colonists. Hopefully they'll come back with that maintenance squad you sent to give their systems a safety inspection. Keep checking. Mei Quan?'

'Yes, Captain?'

Sherwin hated to say this, as it was acknowledging the loss of her friend. 'While Salamanca is. . . unavailable, you will carry out the duties of XO as well as military attache.'

Locked alone in the cabin, Salamanca felt lost. How long had he been serving aboard this ship? Perhaps that was a question that he should take more literally, and the concept felt saddening. Salamanca was no fool, though. Any interference with the day-to-day running of the ship was a danger to the crew and the mission, and the others'

selective amnesia was very definitely interference.

The question was: was it caused deliberately? It seemed unlikely, but a simple case of breakdown or madness wouldn't have so specif-ically affected every member of the crew. Or had it? If he was unaffected by whatever it was, then perhaps the other Draconians were too. He couldn't imagine why Draconians should be immune to whatever had happened, but perhaps it was a blessing that they were. As 158

for the file she had shown him, well, any fool could intercept a hyperlink.

He felt guilty, somehow. Intellectually he knew he had done nothing out of the ordinary, yet his fellow officers treated him as a stranger. If their minds had been affected by some weapon, then he had failed in his duty to them. The communications terminal in the lounge section of his cabin was still active, so perhaps he could contact the five other Draconians on board. He sat down to work.

The Doctor had to retrace his steps several times, to find his way back to the, pyramid. Although the ordinary Imperial citizens around didn't pay him any attention, he was constantly looking out for any sign of Adjudicators. At least now he had his umbrella to keep the rain off.

There was far more activity around the pyramid now than there had been the last time he was here. Flyers were hovering overhead,

projecting spotlights into the shadows around the buildings. There were armed and armoured men and women patrolling everywhere.

Getting in could prove a little difficult.

Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained. The Doctor looked at his umbrella and smiled knowingly to himself. It was black, his coat was black, and the shadows were, well, black.

Keeping the brolly between himself and the Adjudicators, the Doctor crouched behind it and scuttled along behind a row of parked flyers. He almost ran into the owners of the last one, but stopped just in time.

Two men in medical turquoise were loading a stretcher into a flyer.

The occupant of the stretcher was completely covered, indicating that whoever it was was dead. The Doctor watched in dismay as the two medics closed the flyer's door and then walked off to talk to a couple of Adjudicators. 'Anyone else in there?' one asked.

'Nobody,' an Adjudicator answered. 'Not anywhere in Darkheart control' That was odd – surely Koschei was still there. Perhaps he'd been captured or. . .

'No, it couldn't be,' the Doctor murmured to himself. Making sure that the Imperials were still chatting, the Doctor gently opened the 159

door on his side of the flyer. The stretchered body was lying on a rack in the cargo bay, and the Doctor quickly lifted the sheet from its face, his expression worried.

It was Ailla, and the Doctor gasped. Fumbling with the sheet, he freed her wrist and felt for a pulse. As he did so, he paled slightly, and looked down at her pallid features. 'Oh no. Oh dear, now that changes things.'

'It certainly does,' another voice answered. The Doctor looked up.

One of the medics was standing outside the other door. An Adjudicator behind him held a disruptor levelly.

The Doctor slowly raised his hands.

Salamanca's lined visage, bordered by cropped salt-and-pepper hair, stared back at him from the surface of the deactivated terminal screen.

Salamanca prided himself on his stoicism, but secretly he worried

about the specificity of these events. The other Draconians had indeed been unaffected, but they had also all been quickly confined to quarters as he had. So whatever was going on, Draconians were definitely immune.

Somehow he had to do something about it; that much was certain.

Once those responsible saw how their scheme had affected the Earthers aboard ship, who knew what they might try next? Besides, Captain Sherwin clearly needed his help, whether she realized it or not. It was ironic that the only way he could do his duty was to rebel against her orders.

He wasn't at all comfortable with the idea. He was a man of Draconia, after all, and the chain of command was all but unbreakable to his people. These were exceptional circumstances, though, and if the captain really was under some external – and presumably Imperial –

influence, then it was a question of command fitness.

His duty was clear enough on that point, but no one had written a manual on what to do when the whole crew were affected. He couldn't simply announce that he was relieving the captain, or the other victims would resist. They needed help too.

Salamanca turned away from the viewport, and opened an access 160

panel beside the door. Whatever he did, he couldn't do any good in here. Behind the hand-sized panel was a network of delicate circuitry, and Salamanca traced the lines of contacts with his fingertip. One of these controlled power to the door. As first officer, Salamanca shared command of shipboard security with Mei Quan, but he ventured that he knew more about the ship's systems than she did, thanks to his other duties.

Salamanca identified the right circuit quickly, and shorted it out with the tip of a pen. The door slid open, and he clipped the panel back into place before leaving. At least there wasn't a guard outside, so confident were the others that the doors couldn't be bypassed. That was their bad luck. Once outside, he locked the door. With the access panel sealed, they might not figure out how he escaped, in which case he could simply escape again if he was recaptured. The first logical step was to free the other Draconians, since he couldn't take on the whole crew alone, and they were the only ones who understood the situation.

Salamanca hurried off.

161

Thirteen

TerrellhadnevermetsuchatroublemakerasthisDoctor. Atleast they had caught him before he could get into the Darkheart itself, but the closeness of the capture still made Terrell sweat.

The little man was sitting calmly in a cell, blowing what sounded to Terrell like random notes on a small flute or some such thing. Terrell had often used the ploy of pretending to ignore someone to unbalance him, but it was unusual for a prisoner to do the same. The Doctor looked up. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. Have I done something wrong?’

‘No more games, Doctor, we’ve done some checking. We know you and your friends are spies sent here to scout for the Federation.’

The Doctor put the instrument away and stood up. ‘Then I suggest you check your checks. We are simply travellers who –’

‘That act you and the captain put on didn’t fool us, I’m afraid.’ It had been a long time since he’d chatted to a prisoner like this – since before he had come to this planet, in fact – but he knew that it was best just to get everything on the table straight away. ‘We have pulled a very interesting set of images from our security database too.’ He passed a trio of flimsy prints across to the Doctor. ‘I’m sure you’ll agree they’re interesting.’

The Doctor lifted one, holding it upside down at first. ‘It’s a good likeness isn’t it? Is this the Britannicus Ice Base?’

Terrell let out a long breath, half relieved that the Doctor wasn’t going to try to fool him, and half concerned at how it was possible that this could be the same man. ‘Would you care to tell me how you can be here, three and a half centuries after these pictures were recorded?’

The Doctor’s face lost its amiable look slightly, and Terrell found the change vaguely disturbing. ‘I could ask you the same question.’

‘No human lives so long.’

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‘Don’t they?’

‘Just answer the question.’ Terrell was getting rattled, but wasn’t going to show it.

The Doctor’s cheerfully clownish expression returned. ‘Oh that’s my great-great-great-great grandfather a couple of times removed. They say I look quite like him.’

‘And Miss Waterfield and Mr McCrimmon? This must be something of a family reunion.’ The Doctor nodded enthusiastically. Terrell shrugged. ‘No matter. You may be wondering what I’m going to do to persuade you to tell me.’

‘I imagine you are thinking of hoses and electrodes. Minds like yours usually do.’.

Terrell shook his head. Torture of that kind was common even in the Empire, but Terrell knew that the problem with it was that the subject would tell you anything to get you to stop. That made his information just as unreliable as if you’d merely taken a statement.

Actually, I’m not going to do anything.’

‘Nothing?’ the Doctor echoed Suspiciously.

‘Nothing. At all. No beatings, no questions, no light switch, no food. . . There’s an intercom button over there. Just call when you’re ready to talk.’

When a ship’s crew were cooped up together for so long, it was inevitable that they got to know each other by sight. That being the case, Salamanca knew he would be quickly detected as a stranger if anyone saw him. – even assuming his picture hadn’t been posted by Mel Quan, just in case.

The first thing he did after leaving the cabin, therefore, was head for the nearest airlock and find a maintenance suit and helmet. It wouldn’t look too out of place inside the ship, since the helmet doubled as a welding mask, and was frequently worn by crewmen who were performing such tasks on board.

The hand-cart he was pushing didn’t have tools in it, though, but spare suits and helmets for the other Draconians. If what had 164

happened to him was anything to go by, they would be considered strangers as well.

The nearest Draconian to the cabin in which he'd been interned was Iskander, Clark's deputy. Fortunately there was no guard on Iskander's cabin, and Salamanca palmed the door open. He was surprised it worked, having thought that Sherwin or Mei Quan would have thought to remove his print from the database of authorized personnel. He would certainly have done so, if he suspected someone of being an impostor.

The mustachioed young man in the cabin looked up, his mahogany skin reflecting the cabin's golden lights well. He rose with a grin when he saw who it was. 'Commander, it is good to see you! Have the others recovered from their. . . lapse?'

'I'm afraid not, Iskander. I have escaped my internment.' Salamanca opened the cart, and tossed the younger man a helmet and suit. 'Wear this, and release the others.'

'What are we going to do?'

Salamanca had been thinking about this non-stop. 'This must be some kind of plot by the Imperials, perhaps to take control of the ship. At all costs we must try to help the crew, or at least get word back about what has happened.'

'My life at your command,' Iskander said. 'What did you have in mind?'

Salamanca hesitated. This was most un-Draconian, but they were exceptional circumstances. 'We must retake the ship from the forces which are undermining it.'

The Doctor circled his cell disconsolately. The walls and floor were bare and smooth, as if the room was a single moulded cube. The ceiling was a wide glowpanel, meaning the cell was always lit, and there was no light switch. A plain bed and some washing facilities stood at the floor's edge, but the Doctor was keener on tapping the walls.

'At least in the old days people had the sense to build secret passages into their dungeons,' he grumbled. Giving up on the walls, he exam-165

ined the doorway. There wasn't actually a door, but the edges were lined with alternating electric eyes and energy projectors. He took the small bar of soap from the cell's washbasin, and tossed it through the doorway. There was a sharp crack, and a flash of energy vaporized it.

The sensors and projectors were only a couple, of inches apart, so there was no chance of squeezing between them. The Doctor sat on the bed, occupying himself by plumping the pillow.

He frowned, and used a penknife to cut a hole in the pillow. It was full of tiny flakes of foam. 'Probably very comfortable, but. . . I wonder.' He took the pillow over to the door and held it out tentatively towards the opening. Then he snatched it back, and changed his grip, so that his fingers weren't poking around the sides.

Thus armed, he approached the doorway again, and thrust the pillow through the gap, letting go of it at the last instant. For a moment the pillow was suspended in the air, held aloft by the flickering beams that snapped out at it.

The pillow burst into flame, and a shower of the foam pellets exploded out of it in a cloud. The sparks of energy stabbed out at those flakes that crossed the sensor beams, and in an instant the doorway was filled with a curtain of lightning, from which the Doctor shrank back.

Suddenly there was a duller bang from somewhere inside the wall, and smoke started to ooze from the edges of the doorway as the remaining foam flakes settled unmolested. 'Weren't prepared for that many targets, were you?' the Doctor taunted the doorway smugly. He searched through his pockets, and drew out a small rubber ball, which he then tossed through the door.

Nothing happened. The Doctor rubbed his hands with glee, and went out into the corridor. He stopped to retrieve the ball, then ran out of the holding area. It didn't take him long to get completely lost. In this area of the Adjudication Lodge, there were no windows to the outside to give him any hint of where he was. 'Fiddlesticks,' he muttered. All that was there was a forest of walls and pillars, with intercom terminals and lockers dotted around. Office doors were set into various walls, and the Doctor could hear voices and the sounds 166

of electronic equipment emanating from them.

He turned on his heel. 'Surely one of these leads out of here? Just a moment. . . There are so many people working in this building; they can't all know who I am. . . And if I don't get out of here, I'll probably end up talking to myself.'

He went to the nearest door, and it slid open as he approached. Two uniformed women were inside, repairing a computer terminal. The Doctor cleared his throat discreetly, and they looked up. 'Ah, excuse

me a moment, could you help me at all?'

'What's up?' one of them asked.

'I seem to have got lost. This place is something of a maze, isn't it?'

'It certainly is.' They looked puzzled.

'Yes, well, I was just wondering if you could show me the way out.'

'Don't you know? Oh, I see, you must be one of the Federation party. Why didn't you go back to the ship?'

'As I said, I got lost.' The Doctor smiled apologetically. The younger of the two, no more than a girl, really, stood. 'I'll show you out. It's easy enough to get lost if you're not used to finding your way around.'

The Doctor gave her his best disarming smile. 'That's terribly kind of you.' She gestured towards one corridor opening, and accompanied him along to a junction, whereupon she led him to a group of lift shafts.

One of the lifts opened as she palmed the call panel, and Brandauer stepped out, his eyes glued to a data pad in his hand. He looked up, and did a brief double-take. 'Doctor! How did you get out of your cell?' He drew his sidearm to cover the Doctor, and nodded briefly to the Adjudicator. 'Excellent work in recapturing him so quickly.'

She frowned. 'What?' While she was confused, the Doctor grabbed her arm, and sent her tumbling – harmlessly – into Brandauer. The Doctor bolted as they fell in a heap. He reached a corner and dashed round it, just as a disruptor shot blasted a chunk out of the wall by his head.

In seconds, alarms were blaring, and the Doctor was running full tilt through a random selection of passages. Voices were raised ahead of him, and two armoured Adjudicators burst from a stairwell at the 167

end of one passage. 'Oh no!' the Doctor wailed, and leapt through the nearest office door. The officer doing paperwork within dived for cover as the armoured pursuers crashed through after him.

Salamanca looked out at the entrance to the flight deck from the maintenance crawlspace. Things seemed normal enough in there. In fact it was almost as if nothing had happened to the command crew. Salamanca knew differently, though.

He turned back to Iskander, who was huddled just behind him. ‘Remember, our objective is to help our crewmates, not harm them. Captain Sherwin seems mostly herself apart from her failure to recognize us, so it should be possible to reason with her. You and the others, however, must keep away any stewards who attempt to retake the flight deck.’

‘I’ve already ordered that only stun-guns be used.’

‘Very good.’ Steeling himself against the guilt he could already feel at his underhanded action, Salamanca opened the grille and stepped out into the rear of the flight deck. Iskander followed, and covered Mei Quan with his stungun, since only she was armed. Everyone turned towards them as they strode forward.

The captain’s face darkened with anger as Salamanca neared her.

Though he too had a stun-gun, he held it loosely, not pointing at anyone. ‘I must apologize for this action, My Lady, but I had no other recourse. Please do not attempt to call for help, or I will be forced to stun you.’

‘Typical terrorist,’ she answered. ‘Always blame the victim.’ She glared as Iskander swiftly disarmed Mei Quan.

‘I do not yet know who to blame, but it would not be you, My Lady.’ Salamanca went to Clark’s console and punched the intercom.

‘Engineering.’

‘My life at your command,’ one of his men’s voices answered.

‘Good work, Ensign. You know what to do.’ Salamanca looked around himself. ‘Everyone resume their normal duty schedules. There will be no disruption to the mission.’

‘Then this hijack is a bit of a waste of time isn’t it?’ Sherwin asked.

Salamanca could see the pain and anger in her eyes and knew that she didn’t understand, Not yet, anyway. If anything was going to give him doubts about whether his actions were acceptable to a Draconian noble, that was it. ‘It is not my intention to hijack the ship, My Lady. I wish only to resume my duties, and free you and the others from the effect that has altered your perceptions.’

Sherwin looked at him askance. ‘My perceptions? You still think you’re Salamanca, don’t you?’

‘I understand your Scorpio paranoia –’ She paled, and he recalled that this was a phrase an Imperial agent could hardly have expected to hear. ‘Yes. . . You said that to me just before we arrived here, and I told you that Draconia has no astrology. You remember?’

She hesitated. ‘I did say that to Salamanca. . . But if you are who you say you are, then you could hardly resort to this sort of hijacking.

Noble, it isn’t.’

That stung, and he knew it was because it was true. Salamanca nodded thoughtfully, then handed her his stun-gun. ‘All I ask is to resume my duties and complete the mission, and for you to seek the cause of what has happened here. I and my men will follow your orders, My Lady.’ He spread his hands. ‘If you don’t believe me, then you can end this now.’

She weighed the gun carefully. With your people in control of engineering? How long would life-support last?’

‘They have been instructed to follow your orders.’

She remained silent for long seconds. ‘Very well. I’ll put you on probation. You and your men can return to duty under the supervision of an armed superior. Medical scans will be conducted on all the crew, you and us. You will stand trial afterwards, though.’

‘Gladly, My Lady.’ He was just glad to be able to put his case across.

He pressed the intercom. ‘All Draconia personnel report to the flight deck.’ He turned. ‘All right, Iskander, configure the sensors to look for any odd energy signatures being directed at the ship from the planet.’

Brandauer was hot on the heels of the Doctor, several armoured men with him. Brandauer had always thought himself more of a thinker

than a man of action, but something about the Doctor’s bravura had made him want to see this through.

The Doctor dashed headlong through a refectory, trying to shove any handy chairs into the Adjudicators’ path behind him. Brandauer dodged round them, trying to get a clear shot at the flapping black

coat, but the Doctor had already half fallen and half ducked under the counter and out through the service doors at the back of the kitchen.

By the time Brandauer and his men scrambled over or through the furniture, the Doctor was just disappearing round a sloping corner.

They charged on up the passageway, scattering unarmed officers out of the way, and rounded the corner to find the Doctor hammering furiously at a door that remained stubbornly closed.

The Doctor looked round with deeply etched concern as they raised their guns. 'Oh my giddy aunt!' Brandauer grinned. Should he recapture him, or just kill him to save any further trouble?

He was saved the bother of deciding, as the door opened from the inside, and an overalled technician emerged. He dropped his cup of coffee as he saw the array of guns aimed in his direction, and the Doctor took advantage of his shock to shove him aside and slip through the door before it could close.

There was a last-minute barrage of energy particles, and coffee wasn't the only hot liquid to splash across the floor.

The Doctor found himself in a room with no doors other than the one he had entered through. Fortunately it had no other occupants either. There was a small locking panel beside the door, and the Doctor quickly unscrewed it and pulled a can of quick-setting glue from his pockets. He squirted that into the wiring behind the panel, and it fused.

He leant against the wall, and mopped his brow with a huge spotted handkerchief. The room he was in was filled with low platforms, each with an elaborate console panel in front of it. 'Of course, a transmat chamber! Now if I could just find a transmitter. . . '

* * *

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Gillian Sherwin watched as armed officers escorted the willing Draconians to various duties, then sidled across to Mei Quan. 'Make sure they aren't allowed near sensitive equipment. Keep them out of the loop, but on the fly, you know.'

'I understand.' She took a deep breath. 'Captain, was this deal wise?

They could sabotage any part of –’

‘Well, I can’t just kill them, and they’ve proved that we can’t keep them locked up. This way we can keep them under control with less disruption. Besides, give them enough rope. . . ’

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Fourteen

Koschei was in control of himself, which was as it should be. He examined the readings on his TARDIS console, monitoring the power flow through the Darkheart. Now that he knew what it was, it had been a simple matter to model an analogue of its function and calculate where the energy was going.

That the Darkheart offered a portal into the space/time vortex was clear, but it was a one-way journey. Energy could be transmitted into the portal, or conduit as he thought it should be more accurately termed, but it couldn’t reach out and snatch things through.

A shame that; it would have been so tempting to reach back just a few hours and pluck Ailla from her death. Hindsight was no substitute for proper planning. Anyway, if the Blinovitch Limitation Effect didn’t make such direct changes in one’s personal past impossible, no one who knew one of his people would ever die, except of old age.

Why hadn’t he foreseen the risk of Ailla getting in the way? Of course, he could not have known in advance that the Doctor would be here. He closed his eyes, and his mind flickered with the lightning discharge of energy through the panels and through Ailla.

A discharge of energy. . .

Koschei’s eyes snapped open. What if he directed an overload of power into those systems at an earlier point? Logic would suggest that there would be temporal paradox – that if the panels were already harmless, Ailla wouldn’t die, and he wouldn’t direct the overload back.

But that wasn’t the case here, was it? The energy in the conduit was space/time itself, so doing that would be altering space/time and not altering an object in space/time. But how to control it precisely?

Gillian Sherwin gave up on the ship’s computer core with a final shake of the head. The personnel records, manifests and accommodation 173

assignments were different, but no one had accessed the system. At least not according to the records.

She felt a presence at her shoulder, and turned to face Lieutenant Clark. ‘Yes, Lieutenant?’

‘Captain, we’ve run a full diagnostic on the computer. It’s working perfectly, but a number of personnel files have changed. Apart from the Draconians, fourteen other crew members have been replaced by human impostors, who all claim to be the missing people. Also, the Xarax, Commissioner Epilira and Chief Engineer Ipthiss have vanished. The computer has no files on them.’

Sherwin shivered involuntarily. This was getting creepy, and she was beginning to wonder how long it would be before it was her turn to disappear without trace, or be replaced by some delusional impostor. She looked sideways at Salamanca. He had assumed his usual seat, and the only thing that was different about the flight deck today was the armed guard. ‘All right, same procedure as with Salamanca

– get their homeworlds on hyperlink, just to be sure. Something’s messing around with reality here, that much is obvious, but I want to be sure that nowhere else is affected. Get down to the Infirmary, and tell them to issue the crew with medical telemetry packs on constant send.’ That way, if the telemetry altered, or, more likely, the pack was removed from its allotted owner to be attached to an impostor, an alarm would sound and notify the crew of who was being attacked and where.

‘Aye, sir.’ The communications panel on the desk chimed suddenly, and she changed the settings to answer it as Clark left. ‘Yes?’

‘Ah, Captain Sherwin?’ an uncertain voice asked. It sounded like that strange little man she had met on the planet – the one Gothard thought had come from this ship.

‘That’s right.’

‘Oh, good. This is the Doctor. We met rather briefly at the reception.’

‘I remember. Gothard thought you were with us.’

‘That’s right. Koschei tells me you are here to find out why the Empire came here.’

‘Partly, yes. You know Koschei?’ It hardly seemed likely that someone would bump into an old friend all the way out here.

‘We were at school together, so to speak.’

‘Then you’re a diplomat too?’ Had another mission been sent that she wasn’t told about? Didn’t they trust her?

‘Well, I do try not to rub anybody up the wrong way,’ the Doctor admitted, ‘but I’d really be terribly grateful if you’d agree to see me.

I have some information you might be rather interested in. Koschei and myself have discovered what is happening here.’

That would be worth the trouble. ‘And what’s in it for you?’

‘Well I’m rather keen to get off this planet for the moment, before these Adjudicators try to kill me. I’m somewhat surrounded.’

‘Trying to kill you? Why?’

‘Oh, I think I rubbed them up the wrong way,’ the Doctor answered, as if it was obvious. ‘I can be there in moments.’

‘You can? I can’t send a shuttle for several –’

The Doctor coughed discreetly. ‘I’m in a sort of a transmat station here. I’ll be there just as soon as I’ve programmed the coordinates to scramble after I’ve left. I wouldn’t want anyone following me up.’

It was the same pod, there was no doubt about that. How it had come to rest in the shadow of a neon-decked entertainment complex was unclear. Surely the humans here could not have moved it? If they had, they would have taken it to their headquarters.

No, only the owners could have moved it here. Only they would have reason to. There were many humans passing by the entertainment complex, but the rain distorted things enough that they didn’t notice the observer in their midst.

There was a metallic awning sprouting from just above a ledge over the door. That would be a good place to wait. If the capsule’s owners were still moving it around, they would surely return to it soon.

When Gillian Sherwin reached the observation lounge, a short man in baggy trousers and frock coat was patting himself down as if to make sure that everything had arrived on board in the same order it had

left the planet. The Doctor turned, obviously surprised at her silent arrival, and looked down at the bare feet that poked out from under her uniform slacks. ‘Oh dear, have I come at a bad time?’

‘What?’ Sherwin looked down. ‘Oh.’ She flexed her toes in acknowledgement. ‘You were expecting a blonde Amazon assassin in kinky boots?’

‘Well, it has been known.’ He shuffled over rapidly, and shook her hand. ‘I must say this is a much nicer meeting place than down there.’

‘Yes, the atmosphere was a little tense.’ She looked on as he wandered round the observation lounge, prodding at the furniture, before stopping to look out at the planet.

‘Not a very attractive world, is it?’

‘I couldn’t agree more. You said you had information on why the Empire came here.’

‘Yes, but how much do you know already?’ She told him.

Adjudicator Secular Brandauer remembered being one of the best detectives in the Overcities, three hundred and fifty years ago, and had to admit that it didn’t seem the same out here. No one knew anything about Gothard’s death and worse still, there had been witnesses who had sworn they saw him walking and talking after he died.

They had all passed lie-detector tests.

Brandauer had got used to being an administrator for the Lodge.

Rotas and schedules were immutable facts, and he liked immutable facts. He didn’t like paradoxes. What he really wanted, though, was to fly. He was a qualified pilot, and used to own an ancient jet on Earth. More than anything, he missed being able to relieve the daily frustrations by taking off and soaring.

Now that he had conducted the last interviews on Gothard’s death, and read the pathology report – killed by a heavy fall after a blow to the neck, it said – all he had to look forward to was practising on his saxophone for a while before Oleg came home. Not that he didn’t enjoy the music too.

He was leaving the Adjudication Lodge for the Executive Tower when a figure drew his attention, sitting behind the sergeant's desk 176

in the entryway, There was no sign of the sergeant. It was a sallow stranger, with deep-set eyes and a neatly trimmed, greying beard and he was playing around with the desk sergeant's terminal.

The stranger looked up calmly. I won t be a minute – I just want to check something.'

Brandauer was shocked. This stranger – and surely he could only be from the Federation ship – certainly had a nerve. 'Who the hell are you?'

'You may call me Koschei.' He scarcely lifted his gaze from the terminal. Who could tell how long he'd been there? 'Ah, there we are.' He switched off the terminal, and came round from behind the desk.

Brandauer moved forward, intending to arrest this Koschei. Before he could speak, or draw a weapon, Koschei snapped his fingers. The, discordant sound drew Brandauer's attention involuntarily, as Koschei looked him squarely in the eye. 'Tell me where I may find Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell,' Koschei ordered. The voice was sure and confident – of *course* Brandauer was going to point him in the direction of Terrell. Was there any reason-to think otherwise? 'We will need to go to the pyramid.'

Koschei nodded. 'Then I suggest you find a flyer for us; this is no weather to be walking in.'

Dumbly, Brandauer pointed along the edge of the mezzanine.

Koschei strode off immediately, then paused and looked back. He snapped his fingers again, in a come-hither motion. Since Brandauer couldn't think of anything better to do, he followed Koschei, like a guard dog after its handler.

Gillian Sherwin finished the briefing she had been given, and the Doctor nodded understandingly. 'They could have been a bit more honest in their book-keeping,' he grumbled. 'I have seen missions like this before. At around the same time this group came here, a similar team searching for a means to prolong the Empire went to the planet Avalon.'

Sherwin had read about that in history classes. 'The nanomachines 177

and nova trigger? They wanted to use it to blackmail the dominions into staying loyal.'

'Exactly. Obviously this group is another squadron sent to try to find alien technology capable of propping up the Empire.'

Sherwin snorted. 'They left it a little too late.'

'Not necessarily. This planet here isn't really a planet. It's a part of the neutron star's mass, separated from the rest of itself by a dimensional bridge.'

'What?'

'A rotating black hole could be used for access to the space/time vortex, if you could fly into it and slingshot around without passing through the inner event horizon.'

'It's always been a favourite theory with pulp writers who overlook the fact that your feet would be pulling hundreds of times more Gs than your head.'

'Exactly, but if you could have a black hole with a low density, it would have no singularity – just that conduit into the vortex.'

Sherwin had heard of this theory too. 'Like the giant black holes at Galactic cores?' The Doctor nodded. 'But it'd have to be huge, not the size of a neutron star.'

'Oh, but it is huge. Don't you see? By splitting the mass over two bodies linked by a dimensional bridge, the hole's density essentially occupies that entire dimension. You could call that infinity.'

'It's not far from here to that star.'

'No, well, obviously the density is finite, and as any finite number divided by infinity is almost nothing, you end up with a relatively small space. Say from here to that neutron star, with a conduit to the space/time vortex inside.'

'So this is some sort of time travel technology?' The implications were obvious, especially considering the loyalty of these citizens of a fallen Empire.

'Not exactly. You could use it as such, but that would be a fraction of its capabilities. Down there, the Imperials have used it to make

themselves immortal, by setting up a temporal stasis attuned to their morphogenetic fields. It continually renews their DNA so they never age.'

Sherwin shook her head. 'Surely a population of immortals would soon become too much for one planet?'

'Ordinarily, yes, but the radiation here is sufficiently high that prolonged exposure has led to sterility. They could resort to fertility treat-ments, of course, or cloning, but why should they bother, when they can keep all the planet's resources to themselves? Children would just be a distraction to them,' he added sadly.

'Wait, could this space/time conduit have anything to do with what's been happening to my crew?'

'Your crew?' The Doctor looked baffled.

'I had half a dozen Draconian officers including my first officer. Now they've vanished, and six humans appeared in their place. Some others have just vanished altogether, including the Centauran who was our protocol officer.' And how often had she wished that Epilira would disappear? She didn't mean for it to happen literally like that.

'That is odd,' the Doctor agreed gravely.

'Not only that, but the ship's computer records deny any knowledge of the originals being on board. I assume the Empire has abducted them somehow, perhaps to interrogate for information.'

'That's possible, but there is another answer. . . '

Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell had been monitoring the communications traffic from the Federation ship for some time before coming down here to watch Vacano's people repairing the damaged panels.

That they seemed to be having trouble with the alien members of the crew suggested that Terrell's idea had been correct. It would take a little time to be absolutely sure of that, and to ensure that the effect wasn't just local, but time was something Terrell had plenty of.

He had learnt patience with the Darkheart. Patience and calm, because he knew that no matter how long he waited, he would find

what he sought. Everyone sought something – wealth, power, women, men, whatever. Terrell was no different. He was only human. He had still been annoyed that the consoles here were damaged, but at least the 179

monoliths were unblemished and functional. He had grown accustomed to walking among them, which was the closest one could get on this planet to walking in a native forest.

'Good evening,' a smooth voice said. He turned to look into the burning eyes of a newcomer in a well-cut suit. Brandauer was with him. 'May I have a word with you?'

Terrell looked at Brandauer. 'Who is this?'

'This is Koschei.' Brandauer sounded a little dazed. Had something else happened?

'I merely wish you to listen to me for a moment' Koschei said blandly, but with an edge of steel. 'Listen to me.' His eyes were hard and dominant. 'Listen to me.'

Terrell could feel the urge to obey, but recognized it for what it was, and blinked, concentrating hard. 'If you need such trickery to make me listen, I doubt you have much of interest to say to me. Brandauer, arrest him.'

Brandauer merely looked between them, confused. Terrell sighed, and reached for his own sidearm. Koschei's mouth twitched as if he wanted to snarl but knew better, and he put up a hand in a staying motion. 'Forgive me, Mr Terrell. Force of habit, and I needed to attract your attention as quickly as possible. Time is very important to me.'

'To me also, Mr Koschei.' Two could play at the formality game.

'I, however, have an excess of time to spare. Consider my attention engaged.' He had guts, Terrell had to admit. That at least deserved a moment of his time.

Koschei looked briefly down, lips pursed. 'Much as it pains me to admit it, Mr Terrell, I believe I require your help.'

'You have a funny way of begging.'

Anger flashed in Koschei's eyes again, quickly curbed. 'I am glad you're amused. Naturally, I accept that some payment must be made

for any favours. All that I require is to conduct, as a scholar, a small experiment or two into the Darkheart.'

'Experiment? We've been experimenting with it all our lives. Ever since the first colonists came here, in fact. What do you think you could discover with a small experiment?'

180

Koschei shook his head. 'Oh, come now, Mr Terrell. You have been experimenting with it for three and a half centuries. A temporal stasis in your morphogenetic fields has given you immortality, so long as you remain here.' Terrell started. This Koschei knew so much. Too much to have been gleaned by a mere scholar from examining the chamber here. Koschei smiled as Terrell's guard dropped. 'I have a little previous experience in the field. In fact I also know that this setup of yours exploits but a fraction of the Darkheart's power.' He stepped away gesturing at the monoliths. 'Quid pro quo Mr Terrell,'

Koschei said reassuringly. 'I can, of course, offer you something in return.'

Terrell doubted that, but the man's charm left him curious despite himself 'Such as?'

Koschei smiled. 'Such as this, perhaps.' He moved his palms across the nearest monolith in a complex pattern. Where his hands moved, a trail of golden light was left behind under the matt surface. When he stepped back, the monolith was pulsing softly, in the same rhythm as the grey sphere overhead. 'I've put it in stand-by mode.'

Terrell was astounded. His engineers had been working on it for centuries, 'yet this man just walks in and plays around with the thing as if it were an everyday object. 'You can operate the Darkheart?'

'Demonstrably. The principle is simple enough – once you have a grasp of temporal mechanics.'

'Who does?'

Koschei smiled coolly. 'I do.'

'And how exactly do you come to know so much about it?'

Koschei smiled like an angler who has just felt a tug on his line.

‘I know many things, Mr Terrell. Many things.’ He pointed sharply at the green orb that had been worked into the centrepiece of the monoliths. ‘I know the focusing lens from a Veltrochni quantum lance when I see one. I also know the result of culture shock when I see it, so why don’t I see it here, if you have had no contact with the Galaxy until the *Piri Reis* arrived?’

Fifteen

Salamancatriedsohardtoconcentrateonthesensordisplaysar-rayed before him, that it almost made his vision blur. He really wasn’t that bothered about finding the culprits – apportioning blame rather than simply solving the problem was an Earth trait his people had thankfully avoided.

He forced himself to concentrate on the job in hand. If the Imperials were somehow responsible for the effect upon the crew’s memory, then it couldn’t have been done by chemical or biological agents, which would have shown up on internal scans. It had been known since the twentieth century, however, that certain electromagnetic frequencies could affect the brain’s delicate electrochemical balance.

It had seemed plain to Salamanca that the best way to track down the source of this strange effect would be to scan for energy fluctua-tions on those frequencies. So far the sensors hadn’t picked anything up, and Salamanca was wondering whether the equipment was equal to the task.

He would do the best he could, though. A Draconian noble could do no less than his best.

Salamanca was still at the console when Sherwin and the Doctor reached the flight deck. The captain felt a renewed tinge of worry at the sight of him. The trust she had felt at his gesture of relinquishing control of the ship in return for resuming Salamanca’s normal dunes had quickly evaporated. She nodded towards him. ‘That’s the man who claims to be Salamanca, my Draconian first officer.

The Doctor nodded. ‘Yes, I see what you mean. . . ’ He went over to where the ageing man was poring over a scanner display. ‘Er, excuse me a moment, Commander. . . ?’

The man turned round, his dark eyes alert. ‘Yes?’

The Doctor regarded him with a kindly expression. ‘You say you are Salamanca?’

‘Of course.’ His tone was almost pleading, desperate for just one person to believe him. ‘Who else could I be?’

‘Well I don’t know, do I?’ The Doctor recovered himself and cleared his throat, tilting his head. ‘I am known as the Doctor, and I’m trying to help Captain Sherwin here.’ He turned to her. ‘Oh, may I call you Gillian? I don’t really like formalities.’

She almost laughed at his earnestness over such a small thing. ‘Of course. Now, the Draconians?’

‘I was just getting to that. As I was saying, I’m trying to help Gillian find out what is happening here, including what has happened to you.’

‘Nothing has happened to me. I am who I have always been. It is Captain Sherwin and the others whose memory has been damaged, and I believe the Empire is responsible.’

‘Well, perhaps. If you are Salamanca, then you recognize my face, of course.’

‘We’ve never met. How would I recognize you?’

‘Never mind whether we’ve met; just look!’

‘I can hardly – Wait a moment. . . ’ The large brown eyes widened in astonishment, then narrowed. ‘It can’t be. . . There is a portrait in the Emperor’s palace on Draconia. It is said to be a visitor to our world, who cured a plague at the time of the fifteenth Emperor – the first man of your skin tone any Draconian had seen. You are the living image of that portrait.’

The Doctor looked rather beatific and flattered. ‘Actually that portrait is the image of me. I am the same person who cured that plague.’

‘Impossible. That was a thousand years ago!’

‘Oh, you’d be surprised at the regularity with which impossible things happen anyway. Possible or not, it does confirm one thing –

that you are who you say you are. No one but a Draconian noble could have seen that picture.’

Sherwin looked from the Doctor to the screen, not sure whether to be happy or despairing at this outcome. ‘But he’s not even a Draconian.’

‘Oh yes he is, I’m afraid.’ The Doctor took on a more sombre look.

‘But he’s a Draconian from some sort of parallel universe. One where human beings evolved on Draconia instead of a reptilian species.’

‘Then how did he get here? And does this mean that our Salamanca is now in some parallel world?’ She shook her head. ‘I hate temporal mechanics.’

‘I really haven’t the faintest idea,’ the Doctor admitted cheerily. ‘But I do know one thing: the Darkheart is responsible somehow. And that means the Empire is responsible.’

Terrell marched into the Naval flight coordination complex, with Brandauer and Koschei in tow. ‘Power up the deflection grid,’ Terrell ordered happily.

The duty controller nodded. ‘There are still a few Federation crewmen on the surface. Some of their maintenance experts have been checking over our flyers, and purchasing food supplies.’

‘Then they’re going to have a chance to get used to the taste. The Darkheart is now under our operational control, and I don’t want the Federation interfering. As for their expertise, we won’t need it.’

The rain drumming on the awning above the entrance to the entertainments complex was somehow lulling, and reminiscent of the constant water flows at home. So far many humans had passed by, but all bore the pallid skin of those who had lived here all their lives. The travellers from the pod would not be so pale.

At least here in the darkness, out of sight, there was no need to worry about being seen. Out in the domed fields, there were few people, and little need to hide. Here in the city, energy consumption had already exceeded that used up in all the time he had spent in the domed fields.

That was not good. If hiding became impossible, then death would surely follow, for the humans would send their warriors in greater numbers. Perhaps that would be for the best, in the end. In many ways, death would be welcome, especially after this solitude. There was nothing more saddening than being alone in a crowd.

It was said that when the time came, none could escape their fate'.

Sometimes it was possible to be overlooked by fate, and it was strange to think of feeling left out when that fate was death. Perhaps fate had done its job – it was as cold here as death. Cold and thin air that scraped the lungs and made one fear they were bleeding raw.

Perhaps this was one of the Hells. Then even death could be no escape.

No, that was not a proper way to think. It was the cold beginning to take effect. These humans tolerated it easily, but it was uncomfortable and unhealthy. If things did not improve soon, exposure might set in.

Perhaps it was a mistake to leave the heated domes.

Nostrils twitched. There was something familiar there. A scent, coming closer. From here the street below was visible, and a few humans were walking past. Two of them seemed familiar, and one of them pointed into the narrow alley beside the building, to where the capsule was. At last! Two of the travellers from the capsule in the vineyard were approaching. Perhaps they had a key to it, and would give access to its communications equipment. . .

The TARDIS sat in the alley ahead, bathed in flickering neon from the buildings on either side. Jamie nodded in satisfaction. 'There ye are.

I told you it was this way.'

'Only after we'd got lost looking for the first street you thought it was in.' Victoria sneezed slightly. 'Let's get inside, – I think all this rain is giving me a chill.' Although Jamie's grasp of the city's layout hadn't been too accurate, though, Victoria did admire his general sense of direction. She had been wrong about the TARDIS's location too. 'Right ye are.' He stepped up to the doors, then stopped. 'Hey, you've got the key, remember?'

'Oh, sorry.' She had quite forgotten. She started looking through her pockets, and froze as there was a sudden splash from behind them, as if something large and heavy had landed in a puddle. She turned, and found herself face to face with a burly Adjudicator in full armour. He didn't seem to be armed, though, which was something to be grateful for. . . .

‘Open the pod,’ he rumbled, his voice sounding deep and rasping.

Not human at all, Victoria thought with dawning horror.

Jamie stepped forward. ‘Now just a minute you –’ The Adjudicator’s armour suddenly paled and faded, vanishing like the morning mist to reveal a figure that would have given Hieronymus Bosch pause for thought. It was about eight feet tall with brown reptilian skin and stood on a pair of legs that had the knee at the back like the hind legs of a quadruped. The frame of some sort of exoskeleton was wrapped around flexible armour. Its jaw stretched out forwards as it flexed its four-digited, clawed hands. Instead of hair, there were neat rows of porcupinish quills, which started high on the forehead, and ran down its back, disappearing under the collar of the armour.

Victoria screamed instinctively, knowing at the back of her mind that she must have half deafened poor Jamie. He interposed himself between her and the creature, which must surely be the creature the Adjudicators were so worried about, and started backing away. The creature stepped forward, with a hollow growl.

Victoria wished she could do something, but it was obvious that her frail strength would be no match for the thing. Jamie dropped into a fighting crouch, grabbing the skean dhu from his sock. ‘Run, Victoria; I’ll try to keep it busy.’ She hesitated. Perhaps if she could get into the TARDIS. . . ‘Creag an tuire, ye –’ The creature batted Jamie’s knife away with ease, and sent him flying across the alleyway with a blow from its massive arm. He crashed into Victoria, knocking her aside and sending the TARDIS key flying from her hand.

Victoria looked around for it with mounting panic, but the ground was awash – literally – with gleams of light from puddles reflecting the illuminated signs all around. The creature lunged for her, but Jamie had staggered to his feet, and ran at it, ramming head first into its midriff The creature scarcely budged, but it gave Victoria the chance to leap back out of its grasp. ‘Run! Get away,’ Jamie urged.

She didn’t want to, but it wouldn’t do for both of them to fall victim to it. Someone had to get word to the ship above, and perhaps if she could reach Ailla. . .

Victoria ran stumblingly away.

* * *

Brokhyth dreamt of swinging from level to level on one of the huge forests at home, as she had done when she was younger. Not that she was actually old now, but once adulthood had been attained, Veltrochni were expected to become useful members of society, and such joys became rarer.

Brokhyth had noticed that other races had a more flexible attitude, without losing any of their drive or skills, and wondered whether her people were missing out on something.

The insistent gonging of the intercom roused her back to the reality of her cramped nest cabin aboard *Zathakh*, and she swung herself out of it irritably. ‘What is it?’

‘A defensive force wall has been projected around the planet,’

Koskhoth’s voice reported. ‘The Imperial warships in orbit are also taking up new positions.’

‘I’m on my way.’ She plugged herself back into the powered armour, and was on the flight deck’s command balcony in moments. Koskhoth vacated the command couch as she entered. In the viewing cube on the arm of the couch, the Imperial warships were moving into a new formation above the city. ‘It looks like a blockade. Have they scanned us?’

‘Not with active sensors, but their passive sensors may have registered us.’

‘Either that or the situation with the Federation ship has changed.’

Brokhyth considered. If the Imperial colony were preparing to commence hostilities against the Federation ship, then it might be prudent to halt them with a show of force. Veltroch was a Federation member, after all, and if it later emerged that a Dragon had stood by and not helped a Federation ship, there could be political trouble at home.

‘Raise shields, charge the quantum lance, and cut camouflage power.’

‘Damn!’ Clark exclaimed.

Gillian Sherwin turned. ‘What’s up?’

‘All communication links with the planet have gone dead.’

He

frowned. ‘They seem to be jammed.’

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‘It’s a defence shield,’ Mei Quan put in. ‘I’m reading a planetary deflection grid now in operation sixty-four kilometres out from the surface.’

Sherwin instinctively looked at the planet outside the observation port. ‘How strong a field?’

‘Off the scale, and definitely strong enough to total any ship that hits it.’

‘Get Terrell on the comms.’

Clark went back to work. ‘No response, Captain.’

The Doctor squeezed in beside Mei Quan at the tactical console.

‘This field will block any attempt to land a ship, or transmat down.

Oh no – only I can operate my I ship, so my two friends are trapped now.’

‘So are my two diplomatic attaches, and half a dozen maintenance men giving the Empire a generous health-and-safety inspection.’ A startled hooting emerged from the speakers throughout the *Piri Reis*.

‘Proximity alert?’ Sherwin exchanged a puzzled look with the rest of the flight-deck crew. ‘Raise shields.’

‘There’s a vessel disengaging a camouflage field astern,’ Mei Quan reported from her station. ‘One hundred kilometres, bearing one-eight-six mark one-seven-five.’ She looked up, a blank look on her face. ‘Captain, it’s a Veltrochni Dragon, with shields powered up.’

‘Don’t tell me someone sent the cavalry in ahead of time! Hail them, Mr Clark.’

Filmy wings billowed out, soon settling into shape as the Dragon *Zathakh* blurred into vision. The giant dragonfly shape swooped round the *Piri Reis* and took up a position halfway between the Federation

ship and the Imperial vessels, which were clustered in geostationary orbit directly above the city.

Sherwin had thought it was bad enough looking out at the Imperial escort on their way in-system, but this was worse. Most humans had a distaste for insects – and a ship reminiscent of an insect, but one that could swat the human craft easily, was somehow disturbing. At least 189

the green central eye that projected the quantum lance was still dark and cold, so there might not be any immediate danger.

She coughed self-consciously. ‘This is Captain Sherwin of the survey ship *Piri Reis*. Can we offer you any assistance?’

The voice responded instantly, deep and raspy, like a baritone panther. ‘This is Pack-Mother Brokhyth. Thank you for your offer, Captain. With your permission, I would like to come aboard and discuss certain. . . sensitive matters with you.’

‘I would be glad to. I can send a shuttle –’

‘That will not be necessary. I will transmat across in one hour.’

Sherwin noted that she didn’t ask if that was convenient. She hated people who took things – and her – for granted. ‘Brokhyth out.’

All the streets looked very much alike to Victoria, but somehow she managed to find her way back to Koschei’s TARDIS, and pounded on the door. ‘Ailla! Please help me!’ There was no response, and another light overhead was beginning to descend towards the landing area.

‘Please open the door!’ The woman had seemed so compassionate earlier; couldn’t she see that Victoria was in trouble?

The lights had resolved themselves into another Adjudication flyer, which landed a few yards away.’ Victoria could feel panic rising in her.

‘Please!’

‘Lie on the ground with your hands behind your back,’ a voice commanded. She turned slowly. A pair of armoured men were holding guns on her. She knelt, then lay flat, trying not to let tears join the rain on the ground against her cheek. The Adjudicators hesitated.

‘It’s all right, gentlemen,’ a smooth deep voice said above her. ‘The lady is with me.’ It was Koschei. Victoria wanted to weep with relief as he helped her to her feet. ‘I trust you’re all right.’

‘Yes. I’m glad you stopped them –’ Koschei held up a hand, and turned to the Adjudicators.

‘You’d best return to your patrol. I have important work to do. Oh, and you can check that with Mr Terrell, if you so wish.’ They looked at each other, then nodded and returned to their flyer. As it took off, Koschei ushered a relieved Victoria into his TARDIS.

‘You were very lucky they believed you.’

‘Lucky?’ Koschei shook his head. ‘It’s a strange thing, Miss Waterfield, but the more I practise, the luckier I seem to become. I told Ailla that many times.’ He turned away to examine the console.

‘Where is she anyway?’ Busy with some complex task, Victoria assumed.

He paused momentarily. ‘Ailla is dead.’

Victoria felt as if she had been struck. The woman could hardly have been more than a few years older than herself ‘I. . . I’m sorry.’ What did you say to someone in a situation like this? ‘What happened?’

‘A stupid accident,’ Koschei snapped with surprising anger. ‘A twist of fate when I wasn’t paying attention to where she was.’ He turned away, and Victoria wondered if this meant he was blaming himself Victoria definitely wanted to cry now. She had hardly known the girl, but she had liked her insofar as she had known her. Also, it wasn’t really fair that someone so young should die. ‘I am sorry.’

‘It’s such a total waste,’ he muttered.

Victoria supposed that it was. ‘Had you known her for very long?’

Koschei didn’t look round, so Victoria couldn’t tell whether his head was bowed in sorrow, or he was simply studying the console panel.

‘How long does anything finite last when compared to eternity? Time is relative, Miss Waterfield; sometimes it seemed I had always known her; perhaps we but briefly met.’

Victoria tried to think of something to help put his mind at ease; that was what one did in these situations, in her time, at least. ‘She’s gone to a better place now, I’m sure.’

He looked round with a sceptical expression. ‘Really? And have you ever been there?’ He smiled suddenly, all edged charm again.

‘But thank you for the thought.’

‘You must miss her terribly.’ And missing a loved one was somewhere Victoria had been. And still was, at times.

‘Must I?’

‘Well, of course.’ Presumably he was embarrassed by her assumption. ‘We all do. When I first met the Doctor, my father was murdered by these Dalek creatures, just before they all died when the Doctor 191

made them fight each other. I thought I would never get over that, but the Doctor said that in time he would sleep in my mind and I’d forget except when I chose to remember. That has been happening.’

She felt uncomfortable and unsure about trying to give unwanted advice to someone older than herself. Probably a great deal older; if Koschei was at school with the Doctor, then he must be about 450

years old too. ‘I expect the same will happen to you.’

Koschei regarded her with a look of mild astonishment, then canted his head. ‘Humans,’ he murmured wonderingly.

192

Sixteen

Brokhyth had been as good as her word, and had materialized in the entrance to the *Piri Reis*’s flight deck precisely one hour after signing off. Sherwin had put on her boots for the occasion, but immediately realized that she needn’t have bothered. Her Veltrochni opposite number was a good eight feet tall, in comparison to her own five foot three.

Mei Quan and the other on-duty officers tried not to stare. Brokhyth looked about her, the doglike snout gently retracting. Maybe it was just her height that was intimidating. ‘Welcome aboard,’ Sherwin said.

‘Can I get you anything?’

‘A place for our discussion will be sufficient.’ The porcupinish quills which ran down her back rustled, ‘Terileptil engineering. Good.’

‘My office is just through here.’ She led the alien into her comfortable den, and noticed with a faint smile that Brokhyth had to almost double over to get through the door. ‘Now, what did you have in mind?’

The ceiling of the Adjudication Lodge’s topmost floor was a transparent dome, through which the starless night was visible. At the moment, the Veltrochni Dragon in orbit was also clearly visible, magnified considerably by computer enhancement projected on to the interior surface of the dome.

Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell looked impassively at the Veltrochni ship. He had hoped he was wrong, but this proved that his fears were well founded after all. This Federation of Sherwin’s was clearly just a front for these aliens. They probably thought so little of the human crew’s skills that they had felt the need to come along and supervise.

It was a little ironic, he noted, that he should champion Sherwin’s abilities to do her job unsupervised by her alien masters when it was

in his best interests to ensure that she didn’t. In some things, all humans had to bond together.

Terrell had always thought there was nothing worse than being supervised continually. At best it was as if you couldn’t be trusted; at worst it was like performing in a sideshow. It was necessary at times, of course, for training and evaluation, but one had to trust one’s people. Not that these were his people.

It had always been the same with aliens. Always ‘we are the superior beings’, or some such. Nevertheless, Sherwin seemed intelligent and canny enough. Perhaps having seen how humans should live might have opened her eyes a little. If so, she may just try to shake off her yoke. He wondered if there might be some way he could en-courage that. He slid into the seat behind his office desk, and pressed the intercom. ‘Hail the *Piri Reis*.’

‘Immediately, sir.’

At once, the holocube on the desk lit up, a tiny image of Captain Sherwin looking out of it. ‘Adjudicator In Extremis,’ she acknowledged. ‘I’ve been trying to contact you. We seem unable to get

in touch with anyone on the surface. Some of my crew are still down there.' Terrell's eyes narrowed, but he didn't let his surprise show.

'An unfortunate turn of events, Captain. The arrival of the Veltrochni ship that accompanies you has forced us to take certain defensive precautions. I appreciate that this may inconvenience you, but I assure you that your people are being well looked after, and that things will return to normal once the threat is eliminated.'

'Threat? What threat?'

'Captain, please. I know that your Federation is mostly an aliens'

club. I merely felt that once your overseers have gone, we can resume negotiations on a human-to-human basis.'

Sherwin shook her head. 'They aren't our overseers.

They are merely here in an investigation of the loss of their convoy.

A whole Pack was wiped out. Terrell tried not to show any signs of the chill he felt. A whole Pack? The loss of a few ships was one thing, but he knew that the Veltrochni wouldn't take kindly to the extinction of a Pack.

'Nonetheless, I would feel more agreeable if I could be certain I was speaking to humans who knew their place in the Galaxy. The Empire will not remain dead, Captain. You may know that we were sent out on a specific mission, and when that mission is shortly completed, the Empire will be very pleased with those who are loyal, and intolerant with treason.'

'I don't think I like your tone, Mr Terrell. Are you trying to issue an ultimatum?'

Evidently her yoke was not going to be shaken off. She must be loyal to her alien masters. 'I'm afraid so. I hadn't wanted to do this, but I see I have no choice. If you ally with us against your masters there, and swear allegiance to the Empire, we will forge a great alliance. If not, your crewmen here will be executed as traitors to the Empire. He really did regret doing it this way. She was clearly intelligent and devoted to her crew, and he would have been proud to serve with her in any ship In the Imperial Navy or the Landsknechte. 'You have twelve hours.'

He cut the connection. The girl was already dead, of course but Koschei had just become a little more valuable. For a while. He wondered what Sherwin would think of Koschei's level of cooperation.

When she found out, it would probably be kinder not to hand him back.

On the *Piri Reis*'s flight deck, Terrell's visage faded from the central holosphere. Sherwin blinked slowly, and sat down. Brokhyth flexed her claws and growled unpleasantly. 'Typical *Iirdmon*.' She tapped her wrist communicator with a claw. 'Koskhoth, get the *Iirdmon* leader back.'

'As you wish,' Koskhoth replied.

'If I may use your communications screen, Captain. . . ?'

Sherwin nodded. 'By all means.'

Brokhyth stepped into the communications alcove, and an image of the Adjudication Lodge's highest office swirled into life. Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell looked quite startled to be contacted. When he registered the identity of his caller, his face twisted into an involuntary 195

grimace of revulsion.

He quickly covered it with a veneer of assured superiority. 'What can I do for you – ah, Pack-Mother?'

Brokhyth's jaws retracted, baring her fangs, and she stepped forward so that the transmitter's pick-up would register her impressive height and powered armour. 'This is Pack-Mother Brokhyth of Pack Zanchyth of Veltroch. You will release your Federation prisoners and hand over to us those responsible for the murders of Pack Huthakh.'

Terrell looked around himself theatrically. 'Excuse my dimness, but did you just make a demand of me?'

'No demand, *Iirdmon*: an instruction. You have twelve hours to complete your task. In case that is not simple enough for your *Iirdmon* brain, remember what my people did to S'Arl.' She cut the connection before Terrell could reply.

'They're hailing us,' Lieutenant Clark reported immediately.

Sherwin snorted mirthlessly, 'Ignore him, he's not worth it. They won't do it,' she said to Brokhyth.

'No.' She bared the tips of her fangs in an all-too human expression of disdain. ' *Iirdmon* were ever stubborn.' She turned away.

'None taken,' Sherwin muttered with heavy irony. She went up to the observation port, but the Doctor was sitting there cross-legged, watching the narrow strip of stars that were the only heavenly bodies visible out here. She had always tried to maintain a sense of childhood wonder in her life, as it was something that she felt gave that special frisson to being a traveller, and was surprised to find someone else who seemed to have that same air. 'I don't think any of us should be. . . woolgathering right now,' she said softly.

If he noticed the gentleness of her tone, he didn't show it. 'I've been thinking about the Darkheart, and how it goes about renewing the colonists' DNA. . . ' The Doctor snapped his fingers. 'Renewing the DNA! I've been an awful idiot.' Sherwin mentally willed him to explain. 'Renewing, or rewriting?' She was still none the wiser, though she was beginning to have a very nasty suspicion.

'Rewriting my crew's DNA?'

'Not all of them. Well don't you see? This Darkheart gizmo has 196

been used to maintain human morphogenetic fields for hundreds of years. All the Empire has to do is project that same morphic stasis through space, and perhaps even – who knows? – time itself That way it will spread throughout space, rewriting all the major races' DNA into human form. Their races' morphogenetic fields will be altered. –

or removed altogether – leaving only the genetic blueprint for *Homo sapiens*.'

Brokhyth's spines flattened in obvious distaste. 'What exactly does that mean, *Iirdmon*?'

The Doctor glared at her. 'Firstly, I am not an *Iirdm-* I mean an Earthman. Secondly, it means that if we don't do something quickly, humans will be the only intelligent species in the Universe.'

'You mean we will all die?'

'No, not exactly, I've been thinking about what happened to Salamanca. Draconia has an atmosphere breathable by humans. I

think that when the effect has reached its fullest extent, all those races who evolved on planets whose biospheres are human-friendly will have been human all along, and won't remember anything different. Those species which evolved in biospheres hostile to human life will simply never have existed!' The Doctor was getting more excitable now.

'That's why your Centauran disappeared. Alpha Centaun's natural biosphere is inimical to human life.'

Sherwin nodded dazedly. 'And with every habitable planet evolving humans, there's no reason why the Empire shouldn't last forever, and spread across the entire Galaxy.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Or the entire created Universe!'

Salamanca turned away, digging his fingernails into his palm to provide a different pain to distract himself Men, especially of Draconia, did not cry. Not even when they heard that their forms were a lie.

Like most people, Salamanca merely wished that life would be the same tomorrow as it was today, without new troubles or pains. Iskander was watching him, and Salamanca knew that the younger officer must be concerned. He could read it in his eyes. 'Sir, are you all right?'

Iskander asked finally.

Salamanca gave a wan smile. The question shouldn't be was he feeling all right, but was he himself? 'An Earth writer and philosopher called Descartes once wrote "I am who I am". I was so quick to protest to the captain that I am Salamanca, but am I?' There was a swollen tingling behind the bridge of his nose and his eyes, and a flutter in his chest. He dug the fingernails in deeper, and it eased.

'It may be as you say, sir, but I feel no change in myself,' Iskander said.

Salamanca was both relieved and sad.

Relieved that Iskander

wasn't feeling the same hurt he was, and sad that the younger

Draconian couldn't see what had happened to himself, because his perceptions had changed along with his memory and his DNA. Salamanca wasn't sure which was the better, his own self-awareness, or Iskander's ignorance. 'I have Salamanca's memories and experience, and personality, but I am not even a member of the same species. And I do not remember being anything else. Salamanca fixed Iskander with a look that bled sorrow like an open wound. 'We are not who we are, Iskander. We are who someone else wanted us to be and there is no worse slavery than being forced to be what you are not, for the satisfaction of another.'

'Then what should we do?' Iskander's voice was very small and quiet – the voice of a boy stumbling on a great and terrible adult secret.

'We must avenge what has been done, and what is still being done.'

Victoria didn't know what Koschei was doing, as the controls in this TARDIS were, if anything, even more hideously complex than those in the Doctor's machine. In any case, all of it was far beyond her time.

He had brought up a display on his scanner screen, showing a tiny red speck in the centre of a pure black crescent that bit into the starfields of the Galaxy. 'Is that this place?'

'Indeed it is, Miss Waterfield. That is the Darkheart system here in the gap between the great spiral arms of the Galaxy.' As she watched, a pale ring spread out from the red spot, growing wider by the moment. A set of numbers blurred through rapid changes at the bottom 198

of the display. 'And that is the area affected by the Darkheart since its directional facility was activated.'

'It's getting bigger.' What effect could it have?'

'Not exactly. This area of effect is spreading as it goes back in time.

In this area, the Darkheart will rewrite the morphogenetic fields and DNA of the dominant species into that of humanity.' He paused the display, as the projected effect reached another star and turned it red.

'It will reach Terileptus in a week.' He zoomed out the display so that a larger portion of the Galaxy could be seen, then let the projection continue. Stars turned red as the wavefront hit them.

'Do you mean every creature affected will turn into a human?'

‘Basically, yes. Except on worlds that can’t support human life.

There, life will cease.’

‘But we have to stop it.’ Victoria could see that this was wrong.

Many of the alien races she had met were evil and hostile, but others were not, and the thought of, say, the Menoptera being wiped from existence was too horrible to contemplate.

‘Exactly what I said. The Doctor, however, seems to have some qualms.’ Koschei zoomed out the display yet again, this tune to show the whole Galaxy. He paused it just as the wavefront neared the centre of the Galaxy. ‘In little more than a month, the effect will reach my world. At that point, neither myself nor the Doctor will be who we are now. What’s happening is a danger to every intelligent species in the entire created Universe.’

‘You have to stop it, you and the Doctor. You must destroy the machinery.’ What other way was there?

Koschei nodded decisively to himself ‘First I must pay the Imperials another visit.’

‘Whatever for?’

‘Oh, to help them, of course.’ Victoria was momentarily startled, but then realized that this was the sort of thing the Doctor had done many times: lull the enemy into letting him interfere by pretending to work with them. He arched an eyebrow. ‘They may yet have a part to play here. The current energy flow must be stopped, but I cannot destroy the machinery yet.’

‘Why ever not? They might just start it again.’

‘Because I need it to do something for me. No, it must be stopped by some other means.’

‘How?’

Koschei gazed at the display, a little pale. ‘By any means necessary.’

Brokhyth retreated to a corner of the officers’ wardroom aboard the *Peri Reis*, and crouched at an uncomfortably low table with what the ship’s computer had assured her was boiled bark-crawler. Brokhyth

didn't believe it for a moment.

The human members of the crew all gave her a wide berth, she was amused to notice. It was strange, though, that everyone here seemed to be human. Surely a survey ship would carry a more cosmopolitan mix of races among its crew.

Were the humans already trying to segregate themselves as superior to the rest of the Federation? Still, she had expected a Centauri to be on board, and maybe a Draconian too, given their proliferation.

Perhaps the Federation was not as cooperative as it wanted to be.

Or, at least, perhaps its human members weren't. Brokhyth brought her wrist communicator up. 'Koskhoth. Keep monitoring my signal, and have some Hunters prepared. If I call for beam-out or a boarding party, you must be ready to respond instantly.'

'As you wish, Pack-Mother.'

Vernon Terrell wore a more casual uniform for these visits to the Darkheart core. He had been quite enjoying his evening of painting – which helped him unwind – especially since it allowed him the chance to see much more colour than was usual on this planet. Over the centuries, he had painted all the murals for the Adjudication Lodge. All of them were based on the theme of triumph over adversity – the parting of the Red Sea, the discovery of the source of the Nile, the escape from Dunkirk, the first moon landing, the destruction of Mondas, the Battle of Cassius. . . There were many paintings. Right now he was working on one of the triumph of the glittergun over the Cybermen.

At least he was until a call from Koschei brought him down here again. The man clearly had his uses, but this was becoming an irritation. 'I am not at your beck and call,' he said angrily as he met Koschei in the midst of the field of obsidian monoliths. Nearby the Imperial technicians continued to work on their consoles.

'And yet you came,' Koschei said with a faintly mocking bow. 'I'm gratified.'

'What have you got for me?'

'Perhaps something more than you might have expected.' Koschei

gestured grandly round the room. ‘I’ve been doing a little more research into this Darkheart of yours, and it has been quite fascinating.’

Terrell didn’t doubt that. Scholars found the strangest things fascinating. ‘Has it been useful?’

‘Oh, yes indeed. Do you, ah, know what this device actually is?’

‘It’s a generator for transmitting temporal energy.’ He had thought that was obvious.

‘Not exactly. This is a space/time conduit, built long, long ago by a race you couldn’t even imagine.’

‘But you could?’

‘Oh, I don’t have to. I’ve met them. The dimension outside time is a vast and incomprehensible place, but not uninhabited. There are beings there: creatures of intellect, whose very life-energies are unwittingly inimical to our mode of existence.’

‘You mean they’re lethal.’

‘Not necessarily. Their presence and force of will can alter the flow of time – they consume time itself. As termites consume the wood they live in, so the Chronovores exist in the vortex, and feed upon time itself.’

‘But what does all this have to do with the Darkheart?’

‘Before the Chronovores evolved into their current plane, they existed in time, as part of it, but with the ability to move through time as we move across space. At that point in their development, they fed on pure energy, the raw power at the hearts of stars. Even they, however, were not immune to their own types of sickness or injury; and that’s where the Darkheart comes in. It was designed and built by 201

those ancestors of the Chronovores, to nourish their young, and feed the sick or injured who could not feed themselves. Since the species could be found at any point in time, the Darkheart contains the ability to project that energy to wherever and whenever it may be needed.’

‘You mean it’s like a sort of drip-feed in a hospital?’

‘Precisely. You have a most enquiring mind. That is good.’ He turned

away into the shadows. ‘With a little imagination, of course, its uses can be rather more varied.’

‘It’s an energy conduit. I know the direction and quantity of energy can be varied, but –’

Koschei shook his head, like a teacher correcting a liked but talent-less pupil. ‘My dear Terrell, you will have a very long time to wait for results if this is the best you can do. All you’re really doing is exploiting a simple side effect of the Darkheart’s operation. The true power. . . That still eludes you, does it not?’

‘And I suppose you can do better.’

‘Of course,’ Koschei scoffed, as if the question was insulting to his skills. ‘The Darkheart was, after all, designed to transmit vast energies around the Cosmos. I would suggest you use it as such.

‘To what end?’

Koschei hesitated, then moved his hands over the pearlescent trident monolith in a complex pattern. In discs and Circles of gold flowed across the jet blocks, rotating and aligning themselves like wheels within wheels. He straightened, smiling darkly. ‘Pick a more specific target.’

‘A target?’

‘Come now, Mr Terrell,’ Koschei said wearily, ‘you are experienced in the use of power as a tool, or a weapon, are you not? Select a spatial location – a station, comet. . . Even a planet.’ He gestured towards Vacano and his technicians nearby.

Terrell was silent for long moments, trying to read Koschei’s mind.

It didn’t work, of course: Terrell had no psi powers, and wasn’t really interested in them. ‘Which is the closest spacefaring alien homeworld to this position?’

‘I think you will find that to be Terileptus.’ Koschei made to speak again, then paused. Any means necessary, he murmured to himself.

Misunderstanding him, Terrell nodded finally, and turned to Vacano. ‘Target Terileptus then.’

Vacano activated the output junctions in sequence. ‘Power is flow-ing, sir. Output coordinates set, and terminals are energized.’

The monoliths were pulsing with fields of golden light as their in-built programming powered up. The orb that filled the core pulsed more strongly, not so much like a heartbeat per se, but a metronome or pacemaker. The grey non-light blended smoothly into the landscape and its shadows. ‘Excellent work, Mr Ko–’ Terrell suddenly realized that Koschei wasn’t beside him any longer. It didn’t matter, he had done his part. He nodded to Vacano and his technicians. ‘Continue with the operation, gentlemen; you may fire when ready.’

The monoliths blazed with that grey non-light, and there was a sudden timeless instant of nothingness that Koschei could almost feel.

What was the fate of one race to that of all intelligent life?

Time, he suspected, would tell.

He turned away, and walked unsteadily back towards the steps of the dimensional bridge. He stopped again, unable to resist one last look. ‘It’s stopped,’ he murmured. ‘By the necessary means.’

As a foaming breaker swamps a coral outcrop, Time flooded Terileptus. The clouds flickered through infinite combinations in the wink of an eye. Beneath them, colours shifted as deserts and jungles undu-lated around each other amidst wildly oscillating seas. Golden static of volcanic activity spattered across the face of the planet as the land-masses flowed and mixed like oil paints stirred on a palette. Strained beyond its capacity, the crust began to split, amber scars of magma slashing across the surface.

Terileptus disintegrated, flying apart in a spreading cloud of molten rock.

The light had returned to normal even before Terrell’s instinctive blink had fully closed his eyes. The monoliths stood impassively, the gold 203

tracing quite still now, while the greyness in the core had shrunk to its usual indistinct ball.

He steadied himself against a wall, the sudden rush having left him feeling quite breathless. He fumbled for his communicator. ‘Did it work?’

‘I’m not sure, sir. There was a power surge, but then nothing.’ There was a long pause. ‘I’ve checked the visualizer function, and can’t find the target. It appears to have worked.’

Sherwin raced into the flight deck, the Doctor at her heels. She just knew that something had gone seriously wrong, and that Ipthiss’s fate was involved. ‘What’s wrong?’

Clark shrugged. ‘I don’t know, but Terileptus has gone off the air completely. We’re being requested to go to Terileptus to investigate.’

For some reason, Sherwin felt herself drawn to the Doctor for guidance. He seemed to have a better grasp of the situation than anyone else she knew. He shook his head sadly. ‘I think it’s more important that you stay here. We can be fairly sure of the cause of this disaster, and besides. . . ’

He seemed reluctant to finish his thoughts. ‘Besides?’

‘I suspect there no longer is a Terileptus to go to.’ He fixed her with a steady gaze. ‘I fear Terileptus has been destroyed.’

Seventeen

Brokhyth paced moodily around Sherwin’s office, getting rapidly fed up With her human opposite number’s diplomatic quotes.

‘The Federation has instituted a policy that representatives involved in hostage situations with a third party should negotiate their freedom –’

‘No.’ Brokhyth had seen this on a hundred worlds. Usually when people resorted to terrorism and hostage-taking, it was because the situation had reached a total enpasse. The terrorists couldn’t back down, or else no one would take them seriously the next time, while the authorities couldn’t back down, or the next time someone wanted to talk to them they would kill innocent people to get what they wanted. It was the proverbial irresistible force meeting an immovable object. ‘This situation is simple, Captain – they will respond to the rule of law, or their crimes will end with their lives.’

Sherwin finally lost some of her cool, which Brokhyth thought made her seem more like a normal decent being. ‘That’s an overly simplistic attitude.’

‘Is it?’

‘If you attack, the Imperial authorities will murder two diplomatic attaches and half a dozen technicians,’ Sherwin snapped back. ‘Now you might not give a damn whether those humans live or die, but the rest of the Federation diplomatic corps does.’

‘That is a possibility,’ Brokhyth conceded, now that they were on understandable terms, ‘but one which we shall try to forestall.’

‘You mean you’re not going to kill them?’ Brokhyth supposed that Sherwin could hardly believe that; after what had happened to the once-great Tzun Confederacy, the Veltrochni had had something of a reputation to uphold.

‘Any dead prisoners are murder victims. Imperial casualties will be a result of military action. Casualties, if you prefer, of war. Of course the 205

first rule of propaganda is to claim that every target hit is a hospital or food centre, but we will know better.’

‘No,’ Sherwin said icily, ‘I do not prefer. You can’t hold an entire population responsible for the actions of a few individuals.’ Actually, Brokhyth could, but. . . ‘You don’t punish a whole Pack for the misbehaviour of a single cub, do you?’

Brokhyth was surprised at the line of attack. It was true that human children were often callous and cruel if left untaught, just like Veltrochni cubs, but comparing the Empire’s callous and cruel behaviour to that of childhood. . . She supposed it was possible to look at the situation that way; the Imperials here were like children far from the influence of the parent. No one had taught them what mores were now acceptable.

She realized that Sherwin was watching her curiously, no doubt puzzled by her silence. ‘If you give in to every whim of a demanding cub, he will learn the value of nothing, and make only more demands.

However, you are correct that we cannot act indiscriminately. Perhaps if we can gain control of key areas, and free your attachés, then we bring the guilty to justice.’

Sherwin relaxed. ‘That sounds more reasonable.’

‘Good,’ Brokhyth said with the ear-twitch that passed for a nod among

her species. ‘I will consult my Hunters about how best to take charge of the city. I suggest you do the same.’ She turned away from the captain, tapping her communicator. ‘Koskhoth, bring me across.’

‘Wait a minute! That wasn’t quite what I –’ Sherwin’s inexplica-ble protest faded, as did her office, and Brokhyth stepped out of one of *Zathakh*’s transmat booths. The deeper and warmer scents of the Veltrochni air were a great relief after the dry and acid atmosphere aboard the *Piri Reis*, and Brokhyth took a few deep breaths as she made her way up into the flight deck’s command balcony.

At least the human captain had helped by showing her the true way to deal with this situation. Obviously she must have some Veltrochni blood in her somewhere to be so sensible in the end. ‘Koskhoth,’ she snapped as she took her place. ‘Compile a holographic map of the entire colony, with life readings and data on communications traffic

nodes that might indicate command and control centres. Then have the Pack Hunter brought to me.’

‘Pack-Mother?’

‘I do not have Captain Sherwin’s patience.’ His pleased snarl made her proud.

Jamie regained consciousness in a disused warehouse groaning and retching as he came to. Before he even recalled that he might not be alone, he was hauled off the ground. Jamie’s captor held him by the collar, his feet dangling several inches off the floor, which was a most uncomfortable position. The creature was at least eight feet tall, with pearlescent spines from the crown of its head all the way down its back, and a face straight out of a witch’s grimoire. It had deep-set eyes above a wrinkled mouth and nose which alternately flattened and protruded forward into a doglike snout as it spoke. ‘You are *Iirdmon*?’

it rasped.

Jamie couldn’t grasp what it meant at first, but realized that it was trying to say ‘Earthman’. He nodded as best he could. ‘Aye, an Earthman. What have you done with Victoria?’

‘The other *Iirdmon* escaped.’ Could it not tell the difference between men and women? It must be an awful thing, Jamie thought, to live in a species that didn’t have girls. The creature seemed to purr softly, and Jamie suddenly wondered if it might not have been a better idea

to deny his planet of origin. ‘You are not like the other *Iirdmon* here.

You arrived in a transmat pod.’

‘A what? Oh, ye mean the TARDIS –’

The creature’s spines rustled like paper on a three-day beard. ‘You are from the Federation?’

‘Er, aye, that’s right.’ If this creature was killing Imperials, but less hostile to the Federation, then who was he to deny it? He recalled that Captain Sherwin and Ailla had spoken of having been summoned by a message from some aliens, who had then vanished. With a flash of insight, Jamie realized that this must be one of those aliens. ‘The Federation received a message from the. . . Veltrochni?’ He hoped he’d pronounced it right. ‘Then the convoy disappeared. You’re from 207

that convoy?’

The alien dropped him with a grunt. Jamie would have been happier if it had given him some warning, but tried not to let his feelings show on his face as he picked himself up. ‘I am Hakkauth, flight director of Pack Huthakh. Our convoy did not “disappear”: it was destroyed by the *Iirdmon* here.’

‘Destroyed,’ Jamie echoed. ‘Ye mean deliberately?’ He wouldn’t have said he was really surprised, because he had thought there was something odd going on here since they first arrived. ‘I told the Doctor there was something sleekit about these Imperials. But then why have ye been attacking us? We’ve only just arrived here, and these Imperials are no keener on us than they are you.’

‘I was not attacking you or the other travellers from the pod, but I had to get you away from the humans here, so that I could speak with you. I need your pod’s communications equipment to contact my people or the Federation, and tell them what has happened here.’

‘That’s exactly what me and Victoria were going to do when you attacked!’ Hakkauth growled, a rolling purr. ‘Aye, well, maybe it’s no’

too late. Victoria has the key to the TARDIS, though. We’ll have to find her first.’

‘She ran towards the *Iirdmon* headquarters.’

Jamie thought quickly. Hakkauth could probably break an Ice Warrior

in half with one hand, and his ability to seem like a different shape might be useful in a subterfuge approach. ‘How do you change your appearance like that?’

‘A holographic projection grid is hardwired into the systems of my armour. It enables images of another form to be projected around me.’

Only images? ‘Then you don’t really change?’

‘I am no shapeshifter like the Rutan, if that is what you mean. If no specific image has been recorded by this sensor –’ he tapped a small lens mounted on one shoulder’– the default setting is simply to refract ambient light, giving an illusion of transparency.’

‘You mean ye can become invisible.’

‘Almost.’ Hakkauth pressed a red stud on a panel on the front of his thigh, and faded. Jamie could see that he was still there, but it was 208

as if the alien was a fine glass statue. Even Jamie could tell that if the surroundings were distracting, such as leaves or complex computer banks, he would blend in much less noticeably.

‘That would be a handy wee gadget to use against the Redcoats,’

Jamie said wistfully. He scratched his head. ‘You might be able to get about unnoticed, but what about me?’

A low ticking rumble emanated from somewhere amidst Hakkauth’s chest. It took Jamie a few moments to identify it as the alien’s version of a laugh. Hakkauth then readjusted the projection around himself, and Jamie found that he was facing an armoured Adjudicator again.

Jamie now noticed that, if he concentrated, he could just make out the distortion that cloaked Hakkauth’s real head, stretching a foot and a half above the human image. ‘Now, you are my prisoner.’

‘What?’ The penny dropped. ‘Oh aye. . . I see.’ He grinned. ‘Now we’ll gie them laldie.’

Victoria was delighted when Koschei returned safely, though he looked a little pale. ‘What happened?’ she asked. ‘Did you stop the changes?’

He looked startled to be addressed directly, but quickly recovered.

‘Oh I did it.’ She wondered what horrors he had seen down in that infernal pit that had so shocked him. ‘Yes, Miss Waterfield, the effect has stopped. Terrell and the others are now busy with some functions of the Darkheart that are rather more narrow in their visions.’

‘But they’re still using it?’ She had expected that he would find a way to destroy it.

‘I’m afraid they are. Sometimes, Miss Waterfield, one must compromise and accept the existence of a lesser evil for the greater good.’

He straightened as he spoke, as if he was trying to convince himself more than her. He turned to the console, and switched on the scanner, bringing up some sort of schematic on it. ‘These conversations are perfectly stimulating, my dear, but, unfortunately, work must intrude.’

Victoria supposed that was true. ‘What are you doing now?’

‘As you so perceptively surmised, the Darkheart must be taken out of Imperial control.’ He smiled crookedly. ‘The cables we saw on 209

the far side of the dimensional bridge are clearly intended to allow the Darkheart to he controlled from elsewhere. Hopefully I can track those cables to that other control area.’

The leader of the Pack’s Hunters was waiting in Brokhyth’s private den by the time the sensor map had been compiled. She was, if anything, taller even than Brokhyth, with pearlescent spines and a leaner, whip-like frame under the powered armour. ‘Mother,’ she acknowledged as Brokhyth came in.

Brokhyth was satisfied by the deference, and slotted the newly compiled data crystal into her desk’s projector. ‘How many Hunters do you have ready for combat?’

‘At least a hundred.’ The younger Veltrochni was almost quivering with suppressed anticipation. ‘There is a task for us?’

In reply, Brokhyth activated the map projection. It was a three-dimensional wireframe display of the city, in red, grey and blue. Green specks marked out concentrations of life-forms, They were moving as they watched, the map constantly updated by telemetry from the ship’s sensors. ‘I want you to study the movement patterns of the humans here, and prepare a choice of landing sites. In a short while, one of Sherwin s people will go down, and attempt to

neutralize the shield. We will create a diversion to cover the attempt. Once the shield is down, I will want the colony command and control centres taken out of human hands as quickly as possible.'

'A great challenge,' the Hunter said approvingly. 'Humans are said to be vicious; it will be good to find out.' Such an attitude was relatively rare these days, Brokhyth noted. It had sired great fighting spirit in the Tzun war, but she wasn't really sure whether it was a good thing or not. It was definitely a good thing in histories of one's ancestors, but face-to-face it was unnerving somehow, regardless of how necessary and useful it also was.

'They have defeated many opponents, even the Daleks and Cybermen. It is said in the Federation that even the Martians fear them.'

The Hunter waved a clawed fist disparagingly. 'Even the bark-crawlers can kill a warrior if there are enough of them. Are there 210

specific rules of engagement for this strike?'

Brokhyth could see that she had raised her daughter well. 'Yes, Brythal.' She wasn't quite sure how to phrase this, as it was unusual. I want enemy casualties kept to a minimum – a bloodless coup if possible.' Brythal's spines quivered, her jaw retracting. 'When the criminals are executed, it must be after a public trial.' What was it Sherwin had said? 'You do not punish an entire clan for the misbehaviour of one cub.'

Brythal relaxed. 'Of course. A wise viewpoint.' She turned to study the map more closely, and Brokhyth wondered if she should mention that it was a human who had made that comment. Credit should go where it was due. Timing, however, was also a consideration and it wouldn't do to let her Hunters go up against humans while thinking that those humans were as wise as their own leaders.

Koschei and Victoria had returned to the centre of the city, and he led her straight towards the Adjudication Lodge, where the cables Koschei had been tracing eventually terminated. She fell into step beside him as he passed through into the chrome and crystal lobby.

A couple of uniformed Adjudicators glanced at them in passing, but Victoria was glad to note that they didn't pay them much attention.

Whatever else Koschei s understanding with Terrell was, it was certainly effective. 'Where are we going?'

‘To the basement. There is another room there that seems to have connections to the Darkheart complex we found. I – we – should be able to do what is. . . necessary, there.’ He led her into a lift that had just been vacated by another Adjudicator, and sent it downward.

Soon, they were in a greyer corridor, where the lighting panels were all behind grilles set into the sloping walls.

There were no chrome or crystal ornaments, or pot plants here.

Plain metal doors were spaced at regular intervals, with signage that identified them as storing things that Victoria had never heard of.

Technical equipment, she assumed.

A large set of polished double doors loomed at the end of the corridor and Koschei studied the locking panel carefully, then unscrewed it 211

from the wall: As Victoria watched, he experimentally touched a variety of wires from the panel together, until one pair sparked and the doors opened. Evidently his understanding with Terrell didn’t extend to the total freedom of the city, or he would not have needed to break in here.

Victoria wasn’t sure whether she should even enter, but the Adjudicators had already shown their true colours where she and the Doctor and Jamie were concerned, and it was as well to be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. She went in.

Koschei looked around approvingly. The room was wide and circular, with the centremost section a couple of steps down. Thick cables were firmly attached to the foundation supports that rose ceilingward throughout the room. Between each pair of support pillars was a small anteroom filled with incomprehensible scientific equipment. In the sunken centre, a series of consoles were arrayed in a circle around a large holosphere. ‘I wonder why they don’t work in here instead of down in that awful place,’ Victoria said.

Koschei nodded towards the open inspection panels in the walls, and the empty power sockets in many of the consoles. ‘I suspect they never finished setting up this room. I imagine that they decided it would be best to find out what the Darkheart was before they started interfering with it. I, of course, need no such delays.’ He went straight over to the consoles. ‘These all seem to be in working order, they are simply not configured and powered yet. Yes, my dear, I do believe we can work with these.’

‘To do what?’

He stared off into space. ‘Anything we want.’ She felt a sudden chill, but he smiled reassuringly. ‘For one thing we can rescue Ailla. First, though, there is so much to study. Knowledge is power.’

‘But, Allia’s dead. . . ’ In any case, Victoria thought, wouldn’t it be better to save her first before settling for study?

‘With access to the space/time conduit, Ailla is only dead until I choose otherwise.’

‘Perhaps the Doctor could help. Haven’t you seen him? He said he was going back to help you with the Darkheart.’

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Koschei shook his head. ‘The dimensional bridge is choked with technicians and Adjudicators right now. I suspect that if he tried to enter he would be captured. Perhaps you might care to ask someone whether he is here.’

Victoria hesitated. ‘They wouldn’t tell me, surely?’

‘So long as you are under my protection, they will.’ He nodded to her. ‘Yes, go down to the cell blocks and see if the Doctor is here. If he is, I will need his help.’

Hakkauth led the human – Jamie – through the city in his natural form. The power cell for the holosuit was running low, and it would be best to conserve it until they were amongst the enemy. There was always the danger of running into a patrol of Adjudicators. Hakkauth wasn’t really concerned about such an event, though – he knew how to look after himself, and so did the human. True the human hadn’t been able to fight him off, but he seemed fit enough to overcome most of his own race.

Hakkauth moved sadly, feeling as if the very fabric of reality resisted his presence. Had he died with the rest of the pack, he would almost be happy. He didn’t have any desire to die, of course, but at least in the great hereafter he could have rested in the knowledge that he’d spent the rest of his life with the ones he loved. Now, he would always be alone, the last of Pack Huthakh. It was an eerie feeling knowing that there was no one else.

He hadn’t had any cubs, and the elders hadn’t yet chosen a mate for

him, so he had suffered no direct personal loss in that sense, but he now, felt somewhat dazed by it. ‘We should find Victoria first, Jamie said.

Hakkauth growled. ‘If she is free, she is safe. If not, we may find her with the other Federation humans. Either way, we must go to them first.’ He had not expected the human to show such concern for another, even for one of his own kind. ‘She is your mate?’

‘Eh, aye. I mean, she’s a friend.’

‘Among us, family is all that matters.’

‘It’s the same in Scotland.’

‘Scotland?’

‘Aye, it’s a country, on Earth. A. . . a kingdom.’

‘Ah.’ This was something Hakkauth understood. A region held by a Great House, to which all the Packs belong?’

‘Exactly.’ Jamie grinned. ‘But we call the packs Clans.’

Hakkauth considered this. ‘I did not know *Iirdmon* were so civilized.’

‘Well, not all of them are.’ Jamie nodded thoughtfully. ‘In fact maybe only –’

Hakkauth silenced him with a wave and a low purr.

His ears

twitched. ‘Something approaches: a flyer, I think.’

Jamie looked up at the black sky. ‘Ye’d better switch on your disguise.’ Hakkauth tapped a code into the panel on his wrist, and was promptly wrapped in the illusion of a gun-toting Adjudicator in full body armour. He was just in time, as a flyer emerged from a rooftop to one side. A searchlight stabbed down at them. ‘Wave them down,’

Jamie said suddenly.

‘Why?’ They were supposed to be discreet.

‘They think you’re one of them, so they’ll expect ye to be friendly.

Besides, they might take us aboard and fly us right to their base.’

That sounded logical, so Hakkauth waved to the flyer, indicating to them that they should land nearby. The machine’s searchlight switched off, and it settled to the ground a few yards away. Hakkauth was suspicious at the ease with which the scheme had worked, and extended his claws a little, though they didn’t show through the holosuit’s image.

The flyer’s door opened, and another Adjudicator appeared. ‘Hey, Paxton! Caught one of the Federation spies, and looking for a free ride home?’ He laughed. ‘Hop in, I’m heading back to the Lodge anyway.’

Hakkauth prodded Jamie into the flyer. It would be wise to make this appear convincing if the other Adjudicator was to fly them to their base.

Brokhyth could hear the odd repeated scratching even before she stepped on to the flight deck’s command balcony.

Koskhoth had

climbed up on to the balcony to better hear the sound from her command couch’s communication system, which was a little further back from the low growl of chatter in the crew’s work pit.

‘My apologies –’ he began, straightening up.

She motioned to him to stay. ‘What is it?’ It sounded like a Veltrochni transponder of some kind.’

‘It’s a distress beacon – from an escape pod, I think.’ He went to the lip of the work pit. ‘Signalman, boost the gain on that beacon.’ The scratching slowly became clearer, and more regular. Koskhoth let out a low rumble. ‘Yes, an escape pod homer.’

‘Decode and triangulate,’ Brokhyth told the Signalman. ‘We can pick up the pod.’

‘Decoding. . . The transponder code is that of the *Druzhoth*. The signal is coming from the planet, grid reference two-one-four by seven-three.’ *Druzhoth* was the Dragon belonging to Pack Huthakh. So,

Brokhyth's case was proved. She didn't feel particularly pleased, and in many ways would rather have been proved wrong. It would have been better if some natural disaster or accident had befallen them, because then she would have been able to evade the question of considering humans her enemy.

'Send a scrambled hail. If there are any survivors, they will hear us.'

Jamie didn't feel very comfortable in the flyer, not least because his and Hakkauth s companion in the passenger area was a corpse. 'Who's this?' he asked.

The pilot ignored him.

Hakkauth tapped him on the shoulder.

'Who?'

The pilot shrugged. 'No idea, I'm just ferrying it back. Another Federation spy, I suppose.'

Jamie felt a sudden panic, and forced himself to pull the sheet back from the body's face. It was obviously still fresh as there was no discoloration yet. Not that Jamie was an expert, but he had been on enough battlefields to know what death was like. His worst fear was denied, but only just. 'Ailla!'

'You know this female?' Hakkauth murmured, too low for the pilot to hear.

'She was from the Federation ship, except really she was from a TARDIS. . . ' It was all a bit confusing and he doubted he could explain it as well as the Doctor could. A cawing sound suddenly emerged from beside him. 'What is that?'

'Land now,' Hakkauth told the pilot. 'What for?'

'Because I tell you to.'

The pilot looked annoyed, but perhaps he was of a lower rank than the Adjudicator Hakkauth appeared to be, since he guided the flyer down anyway. They settled on the ground with only the slightest of bumps, and he turned to his passengers. 'Look, Paxton, what's –'

Hakkauth's massive fist wrapped itself around his throat and bounced

his head against the ceiling. The pilot went limp.

Jamie felt for a pulse, and found only a very faint one. ‘There was no need to go that far!’

Hakkauth had switched off the image, and touched the communicator in his wrist. The cawing sound was coming from there, and he touched a button. ‘This is Flight Director Hakkauth of Pack Huthakh.’

The cawing stopped, and another voice replaced it. ‘This is Pack-Mother Brokhyth of Pack Zanchyth. We have retraced your flight plan and located the signal beacon from your escape pod. Are there any other survivors with you?’

Hakkauth hung his head with as much sadness as Jamie had ever seen, even though the person he was talking to couldn’t see the gesture. ‘No. There is only me.’

‘What happened to you?’

‘We were running with shields down, and they disabled us with electromagnetic pulse warheads. I was in the main passageway on my way to the flight deck when it was holed. The air pressure blew me past an escape pod and I managed to hold on to the rim of the door and get in.’

There was a low growl from the other end. ‘We will bring you justice,’ Brokhyth promised. ‘However, there is a deflection barrier in place around the planet which must be disabled first. I have been 216

speaking with Captain Sherwin of the Federation ship. Some of her crew are still on the planet – as hostages.’ She spat out the word.

Jamie was also offended by this type of action taken by Terrell. In the Highlands, it was the depths of dishonour to harm a guest you had admitted, even if he was an enemy. That was why there was still such bad blood over the Glencoe massacre. Such killings were common – and largely approved – among the bandit clans, but it was the dishonour with which the killings were perpetrated by the victims’

hosts that rankled.

‘One of them is with me –’ Jamie tapped Hakkauth on the shoulder. . .

‘Hey, can you get in touch with the Federation ship through that thing?’

‘This communicator operates on a scrambled Veltrochni frequency, but the Pack-Mother may be able to patch through a transmission. You wish to speak to your captain?’

‘Definitely.’

‘Pack-Mother. The human with me wishes to speak with Captain Sherwin. Can you arrange this?’

‘One moment.’

‘This is Captain Sherwin,’ a new voice said. Is that you, Koschei?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ Jamie admitted. ‘I came here with the Doctor –’

There was a brief sound of muffled voices, and then, to Jamie’s great relief – and some puzzlement – the Doctor came on the line.

‘Jamie, I’m so glad you re all right, but why aren’t you and Victoria up here?’

‘Hakkauth here interrupted us, and she ran away.’

‘Hmm. . . She knows where the TARDIS is, and she may have gone back to Koschei’s TARDIS.’

‘Maybe. I can go and look for her –’

‘Now, don’t you worry about Victoria, Jamie, What’s more immediate is that shield that has been put up around the planet, and the Darkheart itself.’

‘Don’t worry?’ Jamie was astounded. ‘But she’s missing!’

‘Well, either she’s in the TARDIS and therefore safe, with Koschei and therefore safe, or taken prisoner in the Adjudication Lodge, which is where we’ll have to go to close down the shield anyway. Now, was there anything else?’ He made the situation sound so ordinary, Jamie thought.

‘Aye, about Ailla –’

‘She’s perfectly safe where she is, I’m sure. Now it’s good that you’re concerned, but I know what I’m doing. We’ll see to Ailla later. Now, I have an idea of how to get to you. Can you find the Administration

building where we were at the reception?'

'I think so.'

'Good. Captain Sherwin says there's a landing pad of some kind on the roof, so I'm going to try to get down and meet you there.'

'We'll be waiting.'

'Right then, I'll hand you back to Pack-Mother Brokhyth.'

There was a brief burst of static. 'Hakkauth?'

'Yes?'

'Do as the Doctor instructs. We will arrange a diversion that he may reach you safely. The humans here will not escape justice.'

Hakkauth merely growled as the connection was ended. Jamie looked over the incomprehensible control panel. 'Can you fly this?'

'Yes, but I will not. When this pilot fails to report in, the Imperials will look for this flyer. We do not want to be near it when they do. We will go on foot.'

Jamie nodded. That was a sound idea.

Eighteen

AdjudicatorInExtremisTerrellwasexaminingabankofconsoles in the Naval flight coordination gallery. Sensor data from all the Imperial starships in the area was being constantly downlinked to the systems here, and Terrell was particularly keen on seeing what data had changed in the sensor readings picked up from the *Piri Reis*.

The *Donau* had been constantly passing down information on the Federation ship since before they had even properly rendezvoused. He was sure the readings had changed since the Darkheart was put into use, and brought up the original life-sign readings for comparison.

As he suspected, the Draconian life-signs had gone, along with the Centauran, Terileptil and Xarax life-Signs. There were more human life-signs aboard than there had been before. Good, then that effect could be restarted if necessary.

Terrell wasn't a despot, and didn't really want to destroy the aliens, but somewhere in his heart he knew he was lying to himself. In so many centuries of isolation it had become easy to think of humanity as alone in the Universe, and it would be easier on the soul if that were the case.

An example was needed, to show that interference would bring swift reprisal, and Terrell had no difficulty in choosing his next target.

As a child, he had learnt that to get rid of bullies, one had to be stronger than they, and make an example of their leader. It was a lesson he had learnt well, and he could easily see who the leading bullies seemed to be here. He moved to the section of the flight coordination gallery that dealt with stellar cartography and astrography.

The section head there snapped as much to attention as was possible in his seat. 'Sir?'

'I want you to plot a set of targeting coordinates for me.

'A planet?'

Terrell nodded. 'Plot the spatial coordinates for Veltroch.'

Sherwin paced irritably, wishing she could reach out and pull her crewmen off the surface. As it was, she daren't move the ship towards the planet or launch any shuttles until she found out whether the shield would keep them out. Ipthiss would have had an answer already, she realized with a stab of pain. Now he wouldn't give any more answers at all. At least the Veltrochni convoy had had other Veltrochni to mourn them and seek restitution. Ipthiss wouldn't be mourned by his people, since they had all died with him. Those who survived on other Terileptil ships would be too busy to consider the fate of a solitary engineer.

No, she reminded herself. She and the rest of the crew were his people now. Terileptus had allied itself with the Galactic Federation, and that Federation would mourn them, and seek justice for them.

The Doctor coughed discreetly. 'Captain? Did I hear you suggest that Koschei and Ailla are your missing crewmen?'

'Yes, along with six technicians.'

‘If it’s any consolation, they have their own ship on the surface, but Ailla might not be –’ The intercom from engineering chimed.

‘Go ahead, Tippett.’

‘We’ve got a probe ready. If it can get through the shield, so can we.’

‘Launch it.’

The Doctor shook his head sorrowfully from the observation platform. ‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that. Even if you can get through, the hostages could be killed before you find them. Also, by the time you ferry the shuttles down and back, the shield’s frequency could be changed and you’d get fried on the way out.’

Sherwin knew that, but what else could she do?

They didn’t

have enough firepower to break down the shield, and even if they had transmats on board, the shield would prevent transmission too.

Through the observation port, Sherwin could see the barrel-like probe streak away from the ship. It disappeared from view very quickly, but the explosion when it hit the shield was perfectly visible.

‘Told you so,’ the Doctor said smugly.

‘Well, have you got a better idea?’

‘Of course I have!’ The Doctor was already rooting through his pockets, and producing the most ludicrous objects, such as a bag of sweets and a small flute of some kind. ‘I’ll just have to get down there and shut down the shield from the inside. Ah!’ He flourished a slim metal rod. ‘There we go.’

‘Great plan, Doctor, except that there s no way to get down.’

The Doctor looked disappointed, and she had the uncomfortable feeling that it was at her attitude rather than the facts she had stated.

‘Oh, but there is. The Imperials have one, obviously, or they wouldn’t be able to send up more ships. He smiled rather smugly, but with an engaging air that said he didn’t mean it in an insulting way. ‘All I have to do is get aboard an Imperial ship like a shuttle or a fighter, and

take it down. Do you have a transmat on board?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Oh that's a pity. . . Can you have your Lieutenant Tippett meet us at your recycling plant?'

He'd breezed through the words as if carrying them out was the easiest thing in the world. Sherwin wondered why he wanted to see the recycling plant. What was the point? Still, he seemed to know what he was talking about, even if nobody else did. She hit the intercom again. 'Lieutenant Tippett, report to the recycling plant. This way, Doctor.' What the hell, she might as well go along with him. If nothing else, it should keep her mind too busy to dwell on the tragedy she'd seen here. 'Salamanca, you're in charge.'

She led him down the steep companionway that led down to a suite of instrument-filled rooms sandwiched between the engineering and hangar decks. 'Most of the ship's services are down here – life-support, robot recharging. . .

Recycling's just here.' She pointed to a large hemispherical extrusion that bulged down out of the ceiling. It looked as if the ceiling was made of rubber, and something very huge was sitting on top of it. Cables and pipes led into the inverted dome all around it, but the Doctor ignored them.

He slid under the very bottom of the recycling chamber, and started

poking at the inspection hatch with the silver rod. As she watched, the hatch sprang open, and the Doctor reached in to pull out a cluster of complex components that were all lashed together with optical monofilaments. 'Yes,' he murmured happily. 'This is exactly right.'

Tippett dropped rather breathlessly out of the companionway. 'Captain?'

'It seems the Doctor has a use for you.' Her bafflement was getting the better of her very quickly. 'Doctor, how is sabotaging our recycling plant going to help get the planetary shield down?'

'Well, it isn't – at least, not directly. It's going to help me get across to an Imperial ship.'

'It is?' Sherwin couldn't see how, but then she was a survey ship

captain, not a dustman.

‘Oh, absolutely.’ The Doctor paused in his untangling of the glittering filaments. ‘Your recycling plant is a transmat, of sorts, but one that has been programmed to enhance the destabilizing effect. It breaks down the molecular cohesion of whatever you put in it, and reassembles it in a different form – recycled. Now, if I can screen out that effect by looping the output feed of the gizmo that reconstitutes things into the input feed of the molecular dispersion unit, it should reassemble things in the same state they went in.’

Sherwin could see with a horrible clarity where this was leading.

‘You’re not going to put yourself through?’

‘Of course I am – I can hardly ask anyone else to risk it, can I?

Assuming you can spare the broadcast channels to send the feedback signal, I don’t see why it shouldn’t be perfectly safe.’

‘If that was true, you would be asking for volunteers.’

The Doctor lowered his head sheepishly, like a schoolboy caught scrumping apples. ‘You don’t miss much, do you?’

‘That’s why they pay me the big money. Well, the peanuts, anyway.’ She grew serious again. ‘Sending a transmat beam is always a precision job, and routing it through comms channels is asking for trouble. Do you have any idea how many bits of information have to be transmitted, and all in one short burst?’

‘About seven billion kiloquads, if memory serves.’ He didn’t seem the least bit concerned.

‘Look, maybe Clark can crack the Imperial access codes and get us through the shield, or at least remote-access their dedicated transmat systems.’

‘At which point the ship’s crew would know someone was about to transmat aboard.’ The Doctor shook his head. ‘Now, I know what I’m doing. More or less.’

Jamie craned his head back to look up at the beige walls of the Administration building. It wasn’t as high or sheer as the broch-like Adjudication Lodge or the huge blade of the Executive Tower, but it was still going to be difficult to get up to the roof They couldn’t go through the inside without being stopped, and Jamie recalled how the rain made walls slick.

‘How are we going to get up there?’

‘Climb,’ Hakkauth responded. He reached out and drove his claws into the wall, to give him leverage. Jamie’s fingernails would hardly do the same job.

‘I’m not a goat, ye know.’

‘A what?’

‘Aw, never mind. If there’s a drainpipe around here. . . ’

Hakkauth emitted a disparaging growl, and lifted Jamie on to his back. Hold on, *Iirdmon*.’ And then he began to climb.

A touch of a single claw brought up a schematic of the Darkheart system for Brokhyth’s consideration. Half a dozen gold cursors were converging on a central one and drew to a halt flanking it as she watched. ‘Koskhoth, keep monitoring the destroyer *Foxhound* for any shuttle departures. That will be our signal to begin operations.’

What about the humans of the Federation ship? It has been proved many times that humans have a quality that makes even the most bitter of enemies unite against a common opponent. They may attempt to prevent our actions.’

Brokhyth doubted this would happen, though there were prece-223

dents. Could a whole Pack, to continue Sherwin s analogy, be made up of warmongers? More likely each group was different, but what if she was wrong? ‘Their cruiser is all but unmanned. They can do nothing. Under another commander, perhaps they would, but Sherwin seemed more interested in working things out positively, Hostility wouldn’t be her choice of action. Of course, sometimes, commanders changed, or were replaced. Prepare a boarding party just in case. If more extreme members of the crew attempt to take action against us, the boarding party will assist Captain Sherwin in restoring peaceful order.’

Koskhoth grinned, showing fangs.

Koschei pointed to the holosphere at the centre of the ring of consoles. ‘Move that over there. I’ll be bringing in my own equipment for installation here.’

The balding technician he was speaking to nodded and waved to his crew to start work. Victoria watched from the doorway. ‘The Doctor isn’t here,’ she reported with relief

Koschei frowned. ‘He isn’t? But then where –? Captain Sherwin s ship, of course.’

‘What makes you say that?’ It seemed an awfully distant conclusion to jump to.

‘He’s not here, not at the Darkheart, and not in his TARDIS. Where else would he find others with the same objectives as. . . ourselves?’

That seemed a reasonable assumption. ‘What are you doing now?’

‘Helping Terrell get the Darkheart working as it was intended to.’

Victoria was determined not to be fooled this time. She checked that the technicians were out of earshot. ‘You mean pretending to, so that you can work from the inside?’

He gave a conspiratorial nod. ‘Naturally. The Darkheart will function, of course, but not quite in the way he had in mind.’

Victoria understood: he wanted to save Ailla. ‘The Doctor has always said that you can’t go back and change what has happened to you. I’m not sure whether he means it is impossible or just wrong. . . ’

‘Both – under normal circumstances. It would be so easy with this 224

equipment – to undo what has been done. . . .’ Even lesser evils and necessities could be undone. Which is the lesser evil? To let murder lie, or to stand for what you believe in?’

Victoria shrugged. ‘What do you believe in?’

‘Oh I believe in me.’ He paused as if in thought. ‘Whoever that is. I will tell one of the technicians to show you how to operate the communications equipment here. Contact Captain Sherwin on the *Piri Reis*, or the Doctor if he is there. Tell them that everything is under control, and the Darkheart will be dealt with without loss of life.’ He frowned. ‘Without further loss of life, anyway.’

Jamie had climbed trees often enough in his youth in Scotland, and clambered up rocky slopes too, but the way Hakkauth climbed was beyond anything Jamie had ever seen. Instead of looking for suitable hand and foot holds, Hakkauth had simply swarmed straight up the side of the building, hammering claws into the walls for purchase.

Jaime had never been afraid of heights, but this was the first time he had wished he had stayed firmly on the ground, as Hakkauth’s rapid ascent threatened to throw Jamie off into the air.

With a speed that left Jamie breathless, Hakkauth leapt on to the roof, and lowered Jamie to the floor. ‘Where did you learn to do that?’

he asked.

‘All cubs must learn how to move. You *Iirdmon* do not live in the trees?’

‘No.’

‘That explains why you are so unfit.’ The comment rankled with Jamie. He walked off towards the floodlit landing pad. No one was around, and a blockhouse with a door was the only connection to the inside of the building. There were plenty of little vents and antennae dotted around the roof, however.

‘We’d better find somewhere to shelter,’ Jamie said, turning to practicalities. There s no telling how long the Doctor will take to get here.’

The systems inside Koschei’s TARDIS hummed to themselves, maintaining the programmed equilibrium heedless of events outside. The 225

doors opened, and an almost shapeless figure fell in, huddled in a blanket.

It groaned softly, as if in relief, then rose unsteadily. A pale hand stretched out from the blanket to close the doors. The effort was almost too much, but the console provided a convenient prop on which to lean oneself for support.

There was something here that could help, if memory served. . .

Part of the TARDIS, a room at the heart of the machine. Yes, that was where things would improve. It would probably be easier to crawl, with these wobbly legs. Yes, crawl, definitely.

Gathering the blanket around itself, the figure moved deeper into the TARDIS.

The Doctor had hardwired the signal cable for the ship’s holographic communications array into the recycling plant, and now sat on the projection grid in the holographic alcove, humming to himself as he tested various wires and cables that he wanted to connect to each other. Clark was seated at his console next to the annexe, and the Doctor was surrounded by a mass of data crystals, optical fibres and sensor inputs.

‘I’m getting a steady flow through that one,’ Clark said as the Doctor twisted a couple of filaments together. ‘Good, good.’ He touched another pair to each other. ‘How about this?’

‘No,’ Clark yelped. ‘That’s giving us a feedback loop!’

‘Oh, right. It must be these two, then.’ He twisted more cables together. ‘How about that?’

‘That looks fine, though I still think this is a stupid idea.’

The Doctor stood, pushing all the discarded spares off the projection grid. ‘Well of course it is! Unfortunately it’s also our only idea.’ He mopped his brow with his spotted handkerchief, and left the alcove.

‘Now, do you have a communicator or some such thing I could take with me?’

It seemed like a good idea to Sherwin, so she handed over her own communicator pendant. The Doctor took it with a smile. ‘Yes, that should do nicely.’ He dropped it into a pocket rather than putting it

round his own neck.

‘Captain,’ Clark said from his console. ‘I’m getting a signal from the planet – audio only.’

‘Let’s hear it.’

‘Hello,’ a hesitant female voice said, ‘can anyone hear me?’

The Doctor’s face brightened considerably. ‘Victoria! Are you all right?’

‘Oh Doctor, we’ve been so worried about you! Jamie’s disappeared and –’

‘Slow down, Victoria; one thing at a time. Now where are you?’

‘I’m with Koschei. He says to tell you that everything is under control, and he’s dealing with the Darkheart machine. He’s persuaded the Imperials that he wants to help them, so that he can switch it off.’

‘Ah, excellent. Now what was that about Jamie?’

‘He’s disappeared.’ Her voice rose in pitch. ‘We were attacked by that

horrible demon creature, and Jamie held it off. I haven t seen him since.' Sherwin almost wanted to cry for her; the poor girl sounded so upset.

'I think we'll find that Jamie is safe. I spoke to him a short time ago.

Was there anything else?'

'Yes,' her voice had calmed down, but still sounded sad and un-steady. 'Ailla is dead.'

'I saw what happened to her, and I don't think you quite understand, Victoria. Everything will sort itself out in time, you'll see.'

'What?'

'Tell Koschei that I'm coming down. I'm going to steal an Imperial ship of some kind to get through the shield.'

'Yes, I'll tell him. Oh, do be careful, Doctor' she pleaded.

'Of, course,' the Doctor told her softly. 'Aren't I always? The line went dead.

'Contact terminated from their end,' Clark said.

Salamanca scratched at his salt-and-pepper beard. 'Doctor, you might want to take a blaster or disruptor with you. The problem with those Imperial warships is that they'll be full of Imperial spacers, and maybe Adjudicators or Marines too.'

'Then I shall just have to avoid them shan't I? Guns upset me. Can you find the captain's cabin on the nearest of those ships, and put me in there?'

Mel Quan was already bringing up the *Foxhound*'s deck plans, culled from ancient records, on her tactical console 'We can, but why would you want me to?'

'A warship captain about to go into battle isn't likely to be in his cabin, is he? It s the one place in the ship that's almost guaranteed to be empty at a time like this.'

She nodded approvingly. 'Sound strategy. You realize their shields are up?'

‘Their shields aren’t designed to prevent communications traffic,’

the Doctor pointed out. ‘By using those frequencies, I can transmat myself straight through. Or rather you can, Mr Clark.’

‘Whenever you’re ready.’ He tilted his head in thought. ‘If their bridge layouts conform to Imperial standards, we could target the control stations and telefrag the command crew through their shields.

We could take the ship.’

‘Tele-what?’

‘It’s a Marine Corps technical term. If you transmat someone or something to the exact location already occupied by another person, that person –’

‘Sort of goes splat as you replace him?’ The Doctor sounded disgusted, and Clark nodded sheepishly.

Sherwin shook her head sharply. ‘Let’s just hope Brokhyth doesn’t think of that one.’

The Doctor went into the communications annexe, and stepped on to the alcove’s projection grid. ‘Well, there’s no time like the present.’

Sherwin followed him, but remained outside the alcove. ‘Look, Doctor, are you entirely sure about this?’

‘Not entirely, no, but one can never really be entirely sure about anything, can one? Transmat now.’ Clark shook his head slightly, and made the transmission. Sherwin couldn’t help but take an involuntary step backward, as the Doctor flickered like a dying image, and winked out of existence.

Nineteen

Colley’s cabin was very different from those aboard the *Piri Reis*, and clearly military in nature, with its grey paint and armoured bulkheads. It had very much of a barrack-room atmosphere.

The Doctor was lying sprawled on the floor by a footlocker, and sat up slowly, rubbing his head like a man waking up in a strange room after a pub crawl. He rose, and looked out of the cabin’s armoured viewport. Some distance away was the cheery white swan of the *Piri*

Reis. The Doctor grinned, cheered up immediately. ‘It worked. He hopped for joy, then remembered where he was, and fished the communication pendant from his pocket. Captain Sherwin, this is the Doctor calling. Can you hear me?’

Gillian Sherwin almost jumped out of her skin when the Doctor’s voice came over the airwaves. ‘This is the Doctor calling Captain Sherwin.

Are you there?’

‘I’m here, Doctor. We read you loud and clear.’ She held out her open hand, and Clark and Mei Quan each reluctantly tipped a credit chip into her palm.

‘Oh, good. I seem to be on board this Imperial warship here. I’ll try to find some sort of smaller ship to get down to the surface, and I’ll contact you then.’

‘We’ll be listening. Watch your back over there.’

The Doctor pressed himself into a gap between two sets of recycling pipes as a group of men and women in Adjudicators uniforms ran through the corridor he was in. Once they had passed, he peeked out, and made a half-hearted attempt at straightening his coat, not that squeezing between the pipes would have been able to crumple it much more than it already was.

‘Now,’ he muttered to himself ‘Where would they keep the shuttles around here?’ He stopped at a junction, where a few crewmen in scruffy coveralls were welding some piece of the wall. ‘Excuse me,’ he said, putting on what he hoped was a harmless and disarming smile.

‘Could you direct me to the shuttle hangar? I seem to have got rather lost.’

The maintenance men exchanged puzzled looks. ‘New here, are you?’

‘Yes, that’s right. I came up to, er, check on the morale of the crew for Mr Terrell.’ He gave them an encouraging little laugh. ‘And, I must say you chaps all seem to be quite. . . Well, quite happy with what you’re doing.’ He let the laughter and smile fade. ‘Now, I really must get my report back to Mr Terrell, if one of you could show me the way.’

The nearest maintenance man shrugged, and pointed towards a lift

shaft. ‘Aftermost module, deck three.’

Victoria found Koschei in the Viscount’s former office, working out some calculations in pen and ink. She was surprised, since it seemed that machines were used for such things by most people here. Perhaps it was part of his charm that he didn’t discard the reliable ways of doing things. In a way, it reminded her of her father, scribbling away at his writing desk with some scientific observation or other.

Koschei seemed so at home in this position, that it was almost as if he had been born to it, and raised for power. Victoria wasn’t sure why she should think that way, but the image was unmistakable.

He looked up as she came in, and underlined a final figure on his calculations. ‘And what can I do for you, Miss Waterfield?’

‘I’ve spoken to the Doctor.’ He looked, slightly surprised, but then gestured for her to continue. ‘He said to tell you that he’s going to come down in an Imperial ship. It seems that there is some sort of force field he wants to help switch off.’

Koschei smiled slowly. ‘Indeed there is.’ He nodded approvingly, and Victoria felt unaccountably pleased by that. I will see to it that the Doctor is made suitably welcome when he arrives. Now, you look 230

a little tired. How long is it since you ate or slept?’ Victoria started to answer, but then hesitated. She couldn’t really remember. He nodded again, as if he had read her mind. ‘I thought so. Go and get something to eat, and then get some rest. You will do the Doctor no favours by exhausting yourself.’

Victoria nodded with a smile. ‘I suppose you’re right.’ No wonder Ailla had been so fond of him: he was so considerate. ‘You will tell me when the Doctor arrives won’t you?’

‘Of course, Miss Waterfield. Rest assured, the Doctor will not slip past me.’

‘Thank you, Koschei.’ She left. Once she had gone, Koschei leant back in his chair and steepled his fingers, After a moment’s thought, he rubbed absently at his temple, and reached out to press an intercom switch. ‘Terrell?’

‘Yes?’

‘I thought you might like to know I’ve found the Doctor for you. . . ’

The Doctor stepped cautiously into the kind of organized anarchy typical of military hangars. Robots were clambering all over the place, while men worked on damaged shuttles, or oversaw the loading and unloading of cargo.

The Doctor sidled through the hangar, tripping over the occasional robotic messenger as he continually looked around for signs of pursuers.

The nearest craft with an open hatchway was really just a larger version of the graceless flyers that were used in the city, but pressurised for space, and with more powerful engines. He wasn't bothered by such details, though, and went inside. If the controls were the same as in the flyers, and if he could remember how they went. . .

'What are you doing here?' It was a pilot, who had been giving the shuttle a pre-flight check in the shadowy cockpit.

'I was just looking for transport down to the planet.'

'I bet you were. You're an intruder!' He pulled a gun on the Doctor.

'Yes, I'm afraid so.' The Doctor raised his hands wearily.

The pilot reached back to his communications switch. 'Flight Lieutenant Daniels here. I've apprehended an intru–'

A voice interrupted him. 'Daniels, this is Captain Colley. You are to take the Doctor where he wants to go.'

'Sir?' The pilot seemed astounded.

'Instructions from Mr Koschei. The Doctor is to be taken to his requested destination unharmed.'

'Yessir.' Daniels looked at the Doctor as if trying to work out what he should do, then he slowly put the gun back in its holster. 'You, er, wanted to go down to the city?'

'That's right.' The Doctor was as baffled as Daniels himself had looked, and lowered his hands just as slowly. 'Did your captain say these were Koschei's instructions?'

'Yeah, some new buddy of Terrell's apparently. One of your Federation mob, isn't he? Changed allegiances?'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. ‘So it would appear.’

A little alarm sound attracted the attention of the Veltrochni on *Zathakh*’s flight deck. Brokhyth was able to bring up the source on her private viewing cube, while everyone else watched the main viewer.

‘A shuttle?’

‘Yes, Pack-Mother,’ one of the crew answered from her station.

‘It’s leaving ISS *Foxhound*,’ Koskhoth added. Brokhyth’s spines quivered excitedly. It must be the Doctor. ‘Make contact with Terrell immediately.’ Koskhoth whispered something to the communications officer, and in a few seconds, Terrell’s voice came over the speakers.

‘Have you reconsidered, Pack-Mother?’

‘No, *Iirdmon*, I have not. Your time has expired. You will lower your deflection barrier and release the Federation crewmen into the custody of Captain Sherwin and myself, or face the consequences.’

‘With all due respect,’ Terrell said unconvincingly, ‘my twelve hours have a little while to go.’

‘I changed my mind.’

‘I didn’t.’ Brokhyth cut off the communication. She hadn’t expected Terrell to respond well, and nor did she want him to. Psychology had its part to play here.

‘Koskhoth, power the quantum lance. Prepare to select target coordinates.’ The humans had had their warning; if they ignored it, that was their free choice. ‘Scan the enemy composition.’

Koskhoth was already gazing at the sensor read-outs even as his hands operated the weapons panel.

‘The Imperial craft are

constructed of duralinium, with layers of ablative energy shields.’

Koskhoth looked up from the work pit. ‘They are moving to intercept us. *Pendragon* is launching gunships and fighters.’

‘In what strategy?’

‘Rose-petal outriders; standard Imperial defensive pattern.’

Brokhyth was unimpressed. This little branch of the Empire had three hundred years to develop new strategies: their failure to do so was proof of their insular folly. ‘Plot firing solution on the planetary shield generators. Koskhoth nodded and turned back to his subordinates. ‘Duralinium and ablative shielding,’ Brokhyth whispered to herself disdainfully. ‘Pah.’ She opened a communications channel.

‘This is Pack-Mother Brokhyth of the Pack Zanchyth. Secure the area and give us cover to break down their shield.’

There was a faint hiss of static in reply then a voice: ‘With pleasure, Pack-Mother.’

A stream of space wavered and seemed to burst into flame, the green fire slashing out at the turning Imperial destroyer *Jaguar*. The blade of light sliced neatly through the *Jaguar*, shearing it cleanly in half The aft half exploded, while the forward half tumbled, spewing wisps of atmosphere and vacuum-frozen corpses.

Two more beams from separate sources impaled the tumbling forward section, while the nearby cruisers fired particle bursts at the unseen source of the original beam. The Imperial shots continued on without hitting anything. The *Jaguar*’s severed forward hull flashed out of existence in an instant, and the darkness at the source of the destructive energy blades wavered as two more Veltrochni Dragons became visible. The new ships banked towards the Imperial cruisers, their wings fully spread, and fired again.

* * *

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A flash outside the observation port drew Gillian Sherwin’s attention, and she went to the port, not wanting to believe her eyes. Another pair of Veltrochni Dragons were swooping overhead, pouncing on an Imperial ship.

The Imperial warship that had looked so formidable earlier now seemed terribly frail and vulnerable, like a harmless ladybird set upon by mantises. ‘Put out a general hail. Instruct anyone who’ll listen to cease hostilities.’

Epilira would probably have been proud of her devotion to the formal there, for she knew that her instruction was just a formality. No ship

on either side would stand down for fear of the other side taking advantage.

She could see in the first glint of green flame that protocol and diplomacy had not triumphed today.

The green lance scorched

through one of the cruisers, and the Imperial ship boiled away into a cloud of wreckage. All of a sudden, she felt as if she were floating alone in the void, forced to see, and powerless to interfere.

The sounds of rapid gunfire and blood-curdling roars echoed across the auxiliary control room as Terrell hurried in. He drew his sidearm instinctively, though the only occupant of the room was Koschei, his fingers quivering rapidly over the keyboard of his notebook computer.

The noise didn't seem to be disturbing him from his concentration, until a last scream wailed out after which Koschei leant back in his chair, slamming the machine shut irritably. ' *Kshar* cacodemons,' he muttered. 'I hate cacodemons.' He looked up. 'I told you not to call me until the power linkages had been repaired. What is it?'

'It's the Veltrochni.

More Dragons have arrived.'

Koschei har-

rumphed. 'They've been here for some time. Camouflaged, but detectable if you know what to look for.'

Terrell hesitated, wondering why Koschei didn't warn him if he had known they were there. Evidently they still had, their separate agendas. 'They are attacking our cruisers.'

Koschei's eyebrows rose. 'Are they, now? They certainly took their time about it.'

' *Tigris* and *Jaguar* are already down,' Terrell stated angrily.

'Your ships never had a chance, Terrell. The Veltrochni will be using their quantum lance, which was designed to pierce the graviton shielding and terullian hulls of Tzun Stormblades. By comparison your duralinium ships are gnats to be swatted.' He stood, shaking his head.

‘Very well. Let’s see what we can do about this.’ He activated the consoles in sequence, and called up an image of one of the Veltrochni Dragons in the holosphere to one side of the room.

‘Their ships are too heavily shielded. Our weapons can’t so much as scratch their hulls.’ And this was no holovid in which the Landsknechte would ride to the rescue in the nick of time.

‘Really?’ Koschei scoffed. ‘You obviously haven’t tried very hard.’

He moved over to the circle of consoles, and began programming new data. ‘There,’ he muttered. ‘That should give them pause for thought.’

He went back to the main power console, and threw the transmission switch almost insolently.

One of the Veltrochni Dragons was swooping around for a run at the *Donau*, the eye which was ready to project the quantum lance already burning with pent-up energy. Abruptly, a ripple spread across its hull, the metal ageing centuries in a matter of instants.

The strain where the aged metal met the unaged metal was such that the aged part of the hull simply tore free, and the Dragon dis-solved in a cloud of dust and vapour.

Brokhyth started as the Dragon in the viewing cube disintegrated.

‘What was that?’ None of the weapons the Imperials had used were strong enough to have such an effect.

Koskhoth seemed equally baffled. ‘Nobody fired at them. It could have been some sort of onboard catastrophic malfunction. . . ’ He didn’t sound any more confident about the idea than Brokhyth felt.

Dragons did not just disintegrate like that. She instinctively felt that the Empire was responsible, though she couldn’t imagine how.

‘Evasive action. Make it more difficult for them to get a lock on any of us with whatever weapon they are using.’

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The snowstorm of silver darts which had burst forth from the long and squat form of ISS *Pendragon* grouped into smaller flights and streaked towards the Veltrochni Dragons. Brokhyth relaxed on her command couch, relieved that the humans were socking to tried and trusted

methods, because they were well known to her. The fighters and gunships were too small to lock on to with the quantum lance, but they were also too underpowered to damage a Dragon.

The assault carrier which had launched them was a different matter.

'All Dragons keep the cruisers off our flanks. Koskhoth, plot firing solution on *Pendragon*.'

The red-headed Captain Colley of the *Foxhound* noted the leading Dragon's change of course with considerable dispassion. A job was a job to him. 'They're going after the *Pendragon*. Intercept course! Mr Thornton, divert all available power to weapons systems.'

'There's none to spare,' the bearded engineer reported, 'but I have another idea.'

'Make it quick.' They would be in range in moments, and. Colley didn't want any distractions once they were. While the Dragons shields were up, he couldn't use the EM warheads as he had before.

'The shield harmonics may be similar to those of the Dragon whose data core we downloaded. If I adjust the main batteries accordingly –'

'Get on with it!'

' *Pendragon*, targeted and locked,' Koskhoth rasped excitedly. Quantum lance ready to fi–' The ship rocked under a heavy Impact, sending him reeling against the weapons console, and tipping Brokhyth into the crew pit.

'Shields down forty per cent,' someone shouted.

Brokhyth could hardly believe it. She picked herself up, ignoring the sight of a few broken quills left lying on the deck. 'Evasive!'

Colley's fleshy face broke into a grin as sparks writhed across the Dragon's hull. The shield harmonics hadn't been quite the same, but were obviously helpful nonetheless. 'Continue bombardment. All batteries fire!'

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Blazing packets of energy leapt forth from the *Foxhound*'s weapons pods, streaking towards the stricken Dragon's exposed belly. Surely this time the Veltrochni shields would go down, Colley hoped.

The blasts detonated, but not against the target. Colley felt his bowels loosen embarrassingly as another Dragon dropped into the shots path, approaching head on. The blasts spread out across the stronger shields of the other ship, and Colley knew without referring to the sensor displays that this other Pack-Leader had transferred shield power from astern to the front, to take the hits more easily.

The Veltrochni Dragon directly ahead swooped around, its segmented insectile hull unharmed by the cruiser's bombardment. The green lens set into its forward command section was already starting to brighten.

'Evasive!' he yelped, his voice squeaking out across the bridge. The helmsman's shaking hands flew across the console, but it was too late.

The Dragon's green eye, flashed brighter than a star, the light seeming to blaze out; of the main viewer.

Before the captain realized what was going on, a wall of green flame slashed in through the front wall of the bridge and bisected the room, vaporizing both furniture and occupants.

In Brokhyth's viewing cube aboard the *Zathakh*, the *Foxhound* started to split from the nose inwards. Before it completed its division, however, the Dragon's quantum lance reached the reactor core, and the ship was tom apart in a churning cloud of gas and wreckage.

'Target lock retained,' Koskhoth said as Brokhyth regained her seat on the command couch. She felt like a cub who had just been rescued from a burning tree, and snarled in pleasure.

'Fire.' Koskhoth growled a wordless acknowledgement, and triggered the weapons power. Green fire stabbed out ahead of *Zathakh*, and spitted the *Pendragon* lengthwise. Immediately, the Imperial carrier started to tumble. Secondary explosions flickered across its hull as it began to come apart thanks to a total breach of every hull compartment from stem to stern.

The green fire of the quantum lance darted out again, like a nee-237

dle jabbing at a balloon. The *Pendragon* finally shattered, her hull integrity vanishing with a terribly silent finality, Brokhyth hissed in satisfaction. Now she had truly proved her worth. Contrary to popular belief, starship combat was a very rare occurrence. Brokhyth had served a long time aboard the Dragons, but this was the first time she had actually engaged in combat. It wasn't quite what she had expected, as there was no sense of either victory or sadness. All she

saw were computer-enhanced displays of metal constructions falling apart, not the vengeful crushing of enemies. It all seemed so remote that it was hardly worth the trouble.

Reflected beams of light and patches of brief flame flickered across the outer surface of the *Piri Reis*'s observation window, flashing across the horrified Captain Sherwin like static interference on a monitor screen.

The lights flickered and died in her glistening eyes too.

Like most travellers, she had never actually witnessed a battle, just seen reconstructions on the public-access communications networks.

The reconstructions were never like this. They didn't show the true fragility of the ships, how the hull could be fractured like an eggshell, loosing the contents into the cold darkness.

The reconstructions didn't explain how the bright lights of the beams seared flesh and burnt the living to death in instants, or that the beautiful blooms of colour were the destruction of air molecules that should be breathed by the crews. Their thunder didn't express the icy silence of death in vacuum. In a way, Sherwin felt that was the worst of all. No songs of glory, no sounds of the struggle for survival

– only the silence of people not being there any more.

It was a non-sound. The sound of loss; the sound of emptiness.

Sherwin couldn't dare to imagine how she might feel if she knew anyone aboard any of those ships, Imperial or Veltrochni. She didn't really want to know whether she'd feel angry, suicidal, or just hurt.

She didn't even realize she was crying.

Once back in the office, Terrell watched as Koschei put through a new hail to the Veltrochni ships. In a few seconds, Brokhyth appeared in 238

the holosphere. 'Who is this?' she demanded.

Koschei stood with his hands behind his back, and nodded. 'You may call me Koschei. I came as part of the Federation diplomatic team.'

Brokhyth growled. 'Terrell wishes to surrender?'

'As a matter of fact, no. I'm afraid the situation here is very. . .

changeable, and the balance of power is no longer in your favour.

Now at the moment, I have an understanding with the Adjudicator In Extremis that allows me to try to work to resolve this, but it may be wise for you to leave for the moment. I can cover for you, so that you will be allowed to go unmolested.'

Brokhyth looked at him askance. 'You will allow us to go unmolested? We will decide who leaves.'

'Oh, I'm afraid not. You may have wondered what happened to one of your Dragons. . . '

'That was Terrell?'

'Naturally. Now, the power which destroyed that vessel was only a fraction of the power available to Mr Terrell. A rather greater degree of power has already been used, to destroy the planet Terileptus –'

he winced slightly '– and the Adjudicator In Extremis assures me that if your forces do not stand down immediately, Veltroch itself will be destroyed.'

Brokhyth froze. 'Am I supposed to believe that?'

Koschei nodded understandingly. 'I know you have your doubts, but ask your compatriots on the *Piri Reis*, and they will confirm Terileptus's destruction. But make your decision quickly, Captain. I am not entirely certain how long I can keep Mr Terrell distracted.'

'I will consider it. Brokhyth out.' She vanished from the holosphere.

Jamie watched the shuttle from behind a boxy vent to one side of the landing pad. He was soaked through with the rain but it didn't particularly bother him, since this was not an unusual state for a Scotsman to be in. Hakkauth had made himself invisible, and crouched beside him.

Jamie shook his head. 'Look at Terrell and those others just waiting

there – it's a trap.'

'There would be more troops for a trap. It is more likely that the Doctor is already a prisoner on board. We must get him out.'

'Aye, but where to? We can't jump off the roof.' Jamie thought hard.

‘Hey, now didn’t ye say you could fly one of these things?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we don’t have to get the Doctor out: we have to get *in*! Then you can fly us to the TARDIS.’

Hakkauth was silent for a moment. ‘Perhaps humans are not so primitive as I had suspected.’ Jamie didn’t care for that at all.

The shuttle touched down in a cloud of steam, and Terrell and his men started across the landing pad. ‘As soon as the door opens,’ Jamie said, ‘we’ll run across. Hopefully they won’t have time to shoot.’

‘There may be guards inside.’

‘That shouldn’t bother you with those claws.’

‘It doesn’t.’

Terrell stood a few yards from the shuttle, hands on hips. ‘Welcome back, Doctor. Aren’t you coming out?’

The shuttle’s door started to open, and Jamie tensed, ready to spring. A man in Imperial uniform emerged, his hands up. ‘Jamie, Hakkauth! Quickly!’ The Doctor’s voice came from inside the shuttle.

Jamie and Hakkauth burst from their hiding place and pelted across to the shuttle, diving through the door as the Adjudicators opened fire.

The door closed as energy bolts whizzed past outside. ‘Hang on,’ the Doctor instructed. ‘I’m not too sure how this works.’ He operated the controls in the cramped cockpit, and the shuttle lurched alarmingly.

Jamie and Hakkauth were bounced around the plush seats like dice in a tin cup.

Hakkauth roared irritably, and lunged for the controls. The Doctor slid aside, wide-eyed. ‘I will fly this machine.’ For once Jamie was glad at his newfound friend’s straightforwardness.

‘If you insist,’ the Doctor agreed, since there wasn’t much else he could do. ‘Take us to the Adjudication Lodge.’

Hakkauth’s spines flattened. ‘Why there? That is where the enemy 240

are most concentrated.’

‘Not quite. For one thing, they won’t think to look for us there. And in any case Captain Sherwin’s sensors indicate that the deflection barrier around the planet is controlled from there.’ Hakkauth quietened, and guided the flyer downwards.

‘How did ye get that pilot out of this?’ Jamie asked.

The Doctor looked slightly embarrassed, and brandished his folding umbrella. ‘It seems he was under the misapprehension that this was some sort of a weapon.’ Hakkauth switched off the engines.

‘How do we get in?’ Jamie asked.

‘Oh, I have an idea about that. . . ’ He turned to Hakkauth. ‘Is that a holographic projection grid on your armour?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh good. Would you mind awfully if I had a little look at it?’

Hiller was on duty outside the Adjudication Lodge when she saw four Adjudicators bringing in a pair of prisoners. It was the men she had originally found in the vineyard: the Doctor and Jamie. She wasn’t sure why they were being brought here, but since there were four Adjudicators with them, it seemed above board. ‘What’s up?’

‘The Federation spies are to be put with the other Federation crew,’

the Adjudicators chorused. It was weird, as if they were part of some robotic group mind.

‘Hey, one at a time, please.’ The Doctor and Jamie exchanged looks, and without warning, the four Adjudicators vanished, to be replaced by what her startled brain scarcely recognized as a Veltrochni. She hadn’t thought they had broken through the shield yet.

It pinned her arms with a crushing grip so that she couldn’t go for her gun. The Doctor patted its shoulder. ‘Now, there’s no need to hurt her.’ Hiller had been trained to deal with drug-crazed psychos, terrorists, you name it, but an eight-foot armoured creature with three-inch claws that could punch through armour was something else. ‘Where are the Federation crewmen being kept, and where can I find Koschei?’

‘The crewmen are in the Executive Tower – thirtieth floor,’ Hiller gasped with as much breath as the creature would allow her.

‘Koschei’s in the basement here – auxiliary control room.’ At least now she knew what the demon was that had killed so many of her colleagues. If only she could reach her disruptor. . . The Doctor reached past the Veltrochni’s treelike arm, and pressed some kind of hypo to Hiller s neck. There was a hiss, and Hiller felt herself sinking into a bottomless void.

Koschei examined the completed power linkages in the control suite with a critical eye. The technicians had done their best, but humans were an inexperienced species compared with his own people. Once the humans had left, Koschei took the opportunity to do a more polished job.

There seemed to be no reason why it shouldn’t function, though.

The power-flow read-outs were more worrying to him. The Darkheart was merely designed to transmit energy, not to shape and control it.

Trying to do so with incompatible equipment was not his preferred option. At least, it wouldn’t be if he felt he had any options.

There was a disturbing tendency for the energy pattern in the test cycles he had run to lose coherence with distance. That meant there was a danger of energy discharges if any attempt was made to transmit too far into the past. Perhaps if he had been able to study the space/time conduit s builders more thoroughly, to gain a measure of how they might have overcome the problem. . . Nonetheless, two could play at Fate.

First, though, it was clear to him that he must remove the Federation ship. If the modification he had made failed, they would be in considerable danger. Of course, if they knew what he was trying to do, they would become a considerable danger.

Humans were such a changeable species. Except for Ailla of course

– she could always be relied upon. Mind you,’ the Federation presence had its uses. It would certainly continue to distract Terrell from what Koschei was doing with his discovery.

Yes that was more. . . practical. Ailla would approve, if he had his way. If not, then what difference did it make which of the others lived or died?

* * *

The Doctor, Jamie and Hakkauth had managed to penetrate deeper into the Adjudication Lodge. Perhaps, Jamie thought, most of the Adjudicators were off guarding that pyramid. They had soon found a lift to take them down to the basement levels, where the corridors were plain and grey, with grilles over the lights.

They entered a sort of storeroom, with shelves lining the walls. At the far end was a set of double doors, beyond which they could see Koschei and a couple of Imperial technicians at work. A spacesuit locker stood incongruously in one corner. 'Now we can ask him what he's up to,' Jamie suggested.

'Well, those technicians will have to get out of the way first. . . '

'Wait' Hakkauth hissed. 'Someone approaches.'

The Doctor darted for the out-of-place spacesuit locker, and did something to its door that Jamie couldn't quite make out. The door swung open: The Doctor looked quite surprised, but recovered himself quickly, 'Ah, there we are; after you, Jamie.'

Jamie was nothing if not gentlemanly. 'After you, Doctor.'

Hakkauth gave a low growl of impatience, and pushed past them.

The Doctor and Jamie exchanged sheepish looks, and both tried to enter at the same time, bouncing off each other. Jaime stepped aside, and the Doctor went in ahead of him.

Hakkauth was looking round, his spines flattened. 'How is this possible?' He bent down to poke at the console with a claw.

'Dimensional transcendence.' The Doctor was looking at the console with a rather jealous expression. 'Yes, I thought as much. We can use the TARDIS to get everyone up to the Federation ship after all.'

'How?' Jamie asked. 'You've aye said the TARDIS is uncontrollable.'

'Yes, but this TARDIS is a perfect working model. I can parallel my TARDIS to the controls of this one, and operate mine by remote control from here. That way we can guide it with precision.'

'Aye, well that's as may be, but shouldn't you ask Koschei before you

go pochlin' his TARDIS?'

'Oh I will if I see him in time, but there's no need to pochle – no need to steal,' the Doctor corrected himself, 'this TARDIS. Only mine will 243

move, but it will be controlled from here.' He peered at a cursor on one of the console's tiny screens. 'That's interesting – there's someone else in here with us.'

'Koschei?'

'I shouldn't think so for a moment.' The Doctor started reprogramming one of the panels, then plugged in a small crystal that he'd brought from his own TARDIS. It glowed steadily. 'Right, that should just about do it. Now, you two stay here, and explain things to Koschei if he comes back.' The Doctor slipped between the two cylinders and looked both ways. Jamie wasn't about to let him wander off like that and leave them to face up to Koschei. Besides, if their travels together had proved anything about the Doctor, it was that he needed looking after. He followed before the Doctor could decide which way to go.

'Now Jamie –'

'Doctor, if it's not Koschei in here, it could be one of these Imperials, and I'm not letting you walk straight back into their hands.'

Hakkauth had somehow squeezed through the narrow gap, and growled an assent. 'I must do all that I can. I cannot merely stand and wait.'

The Doctor's face fell. 'I don't suppose you Veltrochni have heard the saying that they also serve who only stand and. . . ' Hakkauth loomed impassively. 'No, I didn't think so.' The Doctor gave a resigned smile. Jaime knew that he was secretly glad that his friends were sticking by him as usual. 'Oh, all right then, but stay close, and don't touch anything.'

A chime interrupted Koschei's train of thought. It was the door, which he had locked while performing the modifications involving the circuits from his TARDIS.

Terrell entered when Koschei opened the door. 'You have the Doctor?' Terrell shook his head, though Koschei wasn't surprised. The Doctor, after all, was almost as intelligent and resourceful as himself

‘What happened?’

‘He threw the pilot out at gunpoint –’ that didn’t sound like the Doctor at all’– and his companion got in and they flew away. The 244

demon was with them, and I saw it this time – it’s a Veltrochni.’

‘Naturally, I should’ve thought that would be obvious – I imagine it is a survivor from the convoy you destroyed. Terrell opened his mouth, undoubtedly to ask more awkward questions, but Koschei didn’t give him the chance. ‘Where did they fly off to?’

‘Here. The shuttle’s outside. I’ve got men searching the building.’

‘Here?’ Of course, the Doctor would be looking to close down the deflection barrier. ‘You leave the Doctor to me. We’re of the same people, and I’m sure he’ll understand once I explain to him what’s really happening. Meanwhile, have Miss Waterfield brought in. I have an errand for her.’

‘As you wish,’ Terrell said with a slight touch of sarcasm. Koschei noticed it anyway, but let it go. Now that he was in control of the situation, he could afford to be magnanimous.

Victoria felt quite refreshed now that she had slept and eaten. Koschei had been quite right about that.

He was waiting for her in the control suite he had appropriated.

She noticed that the holosphere that had dominated the centre of the room was now replaced by a column from which many thick cables snaked out.

‘Is there any word of the Doctor?’

Koschei emerged from behind an open computer bank, and smiled.

‘Indeed there is. He is safely on the planet, along with your young friend Mr McCrimmon and a Veltrochni.’

Victoria was delighted. Things weren’t so bad after all. ‘I should go to them. . . ’

‘That won’t be necessary. The Doctor will be joining us here shortly.’

Jamie had expected that he would feel at home here, since it was just a TARDIS like the Doctor’s. For some reason, though, this was not the

case. The TARDIS – that is to say, the Doctor's TARDIS – was sort of welcoming and homely in some way Jamie couldn't define. This one, though superficially similar, had no such atmosphere. It was like being in some machine totally dedicated to performing a set function, 245

and no more.

They had been walking for some time, and Jamie got the feeling that they were lower than when they had started, despite not having gone down any stairs or lifts. Maybe it had something to do with the deepening pitch of the ever-present electronic hum that pervaded the TARDIS. Jamie had never been so deep into the Doctor's TARDIS, since he had always thought the planets outside were the most interesting part of travel. He resolved to change that someday, and explore properly. They had passed a lot of doors, but the Doctor had ignored them all. Eventually, they had come to an open area, on the far side of which was a double door, indented with the familiar roundels.

The Doctor grinned, and rubbed his hands together. 'Here we are.'

The doors opened as he approached.

Inside was an unfurnished rose-tinted room with air that smelt of a summer garden. Lying in the centre a couple of feet above the floor was a figure draped in a blanket. Since the blanket didn't quite reach the floor, it was obvious that the figure was floating in mid-air.

'Rise and shine,' the Doctor called cheerily.

'Show a leg, the

weather's fine.'

The figure sat up, startled, feet dropping to the floor. It was a woman with expressive eyes above high cheekbones and shoulder-length auburn hair that was parted in the centre. She was wearing a simple Adjudicator's jumpsuit that was too large for her, and was therefore cinched at the waist with a belt that was tied rather than buckled. 'Damn, what was I drinking last night? Doctor! What are you doing in Koschei's TARDIS?'

'I'm afraid that's a rather long story.'

'Where is he anyway?' She raised a hand to scratch her head, and paused, patting down the shoulder-length hair, 'Ah. I remember now.

I hadn't expected there to be so much pain.'

The Doctor's expression softened. 'It's quite a shock, isn't it? Are you all right?'

'Is anyone all right? There's always something wrong, some dark side of our nature. . . You'll have to excuse me, but I seem to be in something of a philosophical mood. Must be something to do with 246

life after what should be death. I think it should have been death, anyway. Not sure what else to call it.' She grimaced. 'Is this mental merry-go-round a normal side-effect?'

'I'm afraid so. You're probably just not sure who you are yet.'

'Of course I am! Do you have a mirror anywhere about?' The Doctor silently handed her a pocket mirror. She pulled a few faces experimentally. 'Well all the bits seem to work, anyway.' She looked down at the baggy coveralls. 'I've shrunk!'

Terrell had returned to the Darkheart amphitheatre, and was, as usual, overwhelmed by its scale. He considered himself no mean artist, but the builders of this place had given it a baroque glory. Nevertheless, he would give the Galaxy a painting it would not soon forget

– a new nebula that would be a beautiful flower against the canvas of space.

Vacano scratched at his scraggy beard, and programmed the last coordinates into a console that had been set up to encode and decode the use of the trident-shaped monolith. Energy currents across the pearlescent surface were the control mechanisms, but humanity needed something a little more practical, so the console made the energy transference.

Koschei's action had caused the Dragons to pause, but Terrell knew it wouldn't last. Unless he could remove all of the enemy from the field in one fell swoop, Brokhyth would eventually get impatient and attack the surface. At least Sherwin was holding off, he had noticed.

She was human, and obviously she still had some redeeming loyalty to her people.

'Target locked,' Vacano reported. Terrell nodded. He brought up a holographic image of a planet above the trident-shaped monolith.

The grey world of clouds that was Veltroch hung there. It looked so peaceful, and unrepresentative of the chaos its children were bringing into Terrell's life. 'All power flows are free and clear. Transmission can take place any time.'

'Execute.'

* * *

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In the planet's hollow core, the grey non-existence of raw time roiled and churned with energy, and flashed into a star of non-light.

Terrell blinked. Veltroch still sat there, bathed in the light of its blue sun, yet the controls insisted that a discharge had been made. If he hadn't destroyed Veltroch, what had he blown up? He quickly scanned the console read-outs, forgetting the Veltrochni for the moment.

The read-outs said that Veltroch had been destroyed, yet the display proved that it hadn't. A suspicion slowly dawned, reminding him of the circuits that Koschei had been working on. He switched to a backup system, and the read-outs promptly changed. He had controlled nothing from here, and all the Darkheart's power was being manipulated from the Adjudication Lodge's control room by someone else – Koschei.

Terrell shoved Vacano towards the junction of control systems. 'Get the damn – what are they called? Those things – get them fixed, It seems I have an appointment with Koschei.'

When he reached the Darkheart control suite which he had thought was unfinished, he found Koschei supervising a group of technicians.

They were connecting power linkages to sockets in what seemed to be a spacesuit locker.

Terrell was baffled as to what the linkages were actually for, but that wasn't why he had come here. Koschei turned round as he entered. 'I tried to trigger the Darkheart today,' Terrell said tightly, 'and what do you think I found?'.

'You found that I have re-engineered the control system to be run only from here. Had you destroyed Veltroch, Brokhyth's ships would have attacked for revenge, and I assure you that their quantum lances would penetrate the deflection grid before you could individually

target and destroy all of their ships.'

Terrell gaped. He actually admitted it, and without a trace of guilt.

Terrell had long grown accustomed to obedience, and the thought that someone would work around him without consultation was just 248

so odd as to be unbelievable. 'In my city, I expect to be informed and apprised of all –'

'That's perfectly all right, Mr Terrell, and there is no need for you to be concerned on that score.'

'Isn't there?'

'No.' Koschei sat back. 'This is no longer your city.' All the charm had faded from Koschei's expression, and Terrell began to realize that his smoothness was more the stony facade of polished marble. The bearded newcomer stopped a technician who was passing. 'Have the calculations I requested been completed?'

'Yes sir, they've been routed through to your private terminal.'

Terrell was stunned. He ruled this colony – not because he sought power or mastery, but because it had just seemed the natural thing to do. It was simply the way things were, or had been until now.

'Transmat linkages won't help protect our people from these aliens.'

Koschei snorted. 'What do I care for your snivelling little species?

All you ever do is kill each other anyway; if your lives mean so little to yourselves, then why should they mean any more to me?'

'My species?' Terrell's confidence ebbed away. 'You mean you're not –'

'That is correct, Mr Terrell. And if I may say so, perhaps the business of detection was the wrong profession for you.' Terrell snarled wordlessly, and reached out to grab Koschei by the collar and haul him to his feet. Somehow, though, Koschei caught his wrist in an immovable grip. It was as if his arm was caught in a hydraulic press. How could he be so strong? 'We need each other for the moment, Mr Terrell, but what you need is in here.' He tapped his forehead. 'I need only equipment. Do not presume that you alone can give me what I want.'

Terrell was a man of the cosmos. In his time as an Adjudicator he had

been everywhere, seen everything and dealt with many dangerous men. This Koschei was no different. ‘You’re a diplomat, Koschei.

Do you think you could go through with killing a man? Seeing his face in its last moment of life every time you close your eyes?’

Koschei’s expression was bland. ‘I gave you the knowledge to destroy Terileptus, and don’t think I don’t hear every single voice scream-249

ing – but I’m adaptable. Do not test me, Terrell.’

‘Test you? Give me one reason why I shouldn’t have you executed immediately.’

‘Perhaps because if you try, not only will I kill you first, but just as I can operate your Darkheart, so could I destroy it. And then, where would your precious Empire be?’

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Twenty

TheyoungwomantheyhadfoundinKoschei’sTARDIShadgone off to change into something that was a better fit, so the Doctor, Jamie and Hakkauth had returned to the console room.

Jamie still couldn’t believe what the Doctor had told him. ‘But how can it be? She’s dead, and this lassie looks completely different.’

The Doctor lowered his voice. ‘It’s a sort of ability my people have, Jamie. When our bodies get too worn out, or too badly injured for medical help, we sort of. . . renew ourselves. Didn’t Ben and Polly tell you about it?’

Jamie thought back to when he first joined the TARDIS. ‘They said something about you being an old man with white hair when they first met you, but I thought they were kidding me on.’ Jamie tried to squeeze this concept into his head. ‘Then that’s why you weren’t bothered; you knew she was still alive all along!’

‘Well, of course! You don’t think I’m really so uncaring do you?’

The Doctor looked quite dismayed at the idea that Jamie could have thought such a thing, and the Scot felt a pang of guilt.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I did try to, Jamie, but you’d already jumped to your conclusion.’

The woman nodded apologetically as she returned, now wearing something more resembling a catsuit. ‘I wonder how Koschei’s going to take this.’

The Doctor looked surprised. ‘What? You mean he doesn’t know you’re one of us?’

‘I was instructed not to tell him. I was placed on Earth to wait for Koschei. I was to make occasional reports on Koschei’s activities. There was some doubt over his stability, but everything I’ve seen shows him to be the most level-headed man I know. Or at least, he was. The Doctor’s face was a mask of horror. ‘What was I supposed

to do? Tell all and get hauled up in front of a tribunal? Stay on Earth with its food riots and constant wars? It seemed sensible enough at the time.’

‘Some bargains are like buying a used spaceship from a Usurian –

you may find that it costs more than what you paid for it. But first things first, There are some innocent members of Captain Sherwin’s crew being held here, so we have to get them to safety first.’

‘Where did you have in mind? According to the readings on this panel there’s a deflection barrier around the planet.’

‘That’s why we came to this TARDIS in the first place, the Doctor told her smugly. ‘If we take them to my TARDIS, they’ll be safe from harm, and we can send it to the Federation ship – through the shield if necessary – by remote control from here.’

‘Parallel the control systems?’ She nodded. ‘You’re a quick study. Of course, Terrell and company might not appreciate you removing their insurance.’

‘With the right sort of expertise, we can make the security monitors there see the hostages even after they’re gone; and fortunately I’m the right sort of expert.’

Adjudicator Secular Brandauer couldn’t actually see the *Pendragon*’s orphaned gunships, though his gunship’s flight computer projected a little cursor on to the viewport marking out the position of each one.

The brief battle had gone against the Empire, but that may have been a result of surprise on the part of the enemy.

He was fond of music, but was a performer rather than a conduc-tor. However, perhaps organizing a counterattack by the two gunship forces could be comparable to conducting an orchestra. ‘Alpha One to all *Pendragon* fighters. Form up on the far side of the Federation ship; the Veltrochni may be reluctant to fire on her. Then await my signal.’

Terrell had tried to leave, but the door refused to open for him. He turned back to Koschei, eyes blazing with fury. Koschei steepled his fingers calmly, and rested his chin upon them. ‘You know, I believe

you may be right. The shield will be breached long before we can eliminate all the enemy craft – unless. . . ’

‘Unless?’

‘You could use the Darkheart.’ Koschei fixed him with a firm look.

‘We use the Darkheart to destroy Veltroch as you intended, but –’ he punctuated the intent with a faint nod’– three million years ago, when civilization was barely forming there. That should be a suitable example to the Galaxy.’

‘How?’

‘The Darkheart was intended to transmit energy through the space/time vortex. Obviously, it can lock on to temporal as well as spatial coordinates.’ Terrell felt an odd mixture of fear and excitement. Such power was tempting, but could easily be used against even Earth. ‘Then we will never have been troubled by the Veltrochni.’

‘Good enough. I’ll control the operation from the original complex.’

Koschei nodded generously. ‘As you wish.’ He watched the human leave. ‘Of course,’ he muttered under his breath, ‘assuming it works, we may well simply find ourselves under siege from Tzun Stormblades instead.’

‘No!’ Victoria was appalled that Koschei could consider adopting such a destructive plan. Hadn’t he spent his life opposing this sort of thing, just like the Doctor had? ‘But surely you can’t be so horrid as to blow up whole worlds! That would be mass murder.’

‘Would it?’ He cocked an eyebrow at her, and stood, hands folded behind his back. ‘I am not the monster you think, Miss Waterfield, I merely wish to keep the loss of life under control. A certain pruning is necessary in any garden.’ He worked a set of controls, and a planet appeared, hovering serenely near the ceiling. It was a sulphurous and bloodshot planet, with two pus-coloured moons orbiting slowly.

‘The space/time conduit’s directional abilities could also be targeted against this world, if you so choose.’

Victoria was sickened at the thought. ‘Why ever would I choose to destroy a world?’

‘You might if you recognized it. That, Miss Waterfield –’ he pointed at it with a snap of his fingers’– is the planet Skaro, before the first 253

Dalek expeditionary forces left to explore and attack other worlds. Before, naturally, your father’s death. But for us, through the space/ time conduit, that image is as much in the present as anything else in the Cosmos.’ He paused to let that sink in. ‘Imagine it, Victoria. With the power of the space/tune conduit, Skaro and the Daleks could be erased from the Universe – like that!’ And he snapped his fingers. He stepped closer to her, confident and reasonable. ‘They could be erased from your family history as easily.’

Victoria stared at the image as Koschei focused closer in, through the clouds, so that she could see the city nestling in the mountains as she remembered. ‘The loss and hurt you feel can be gone,’ he continued, his voice so convincing, so reasonable. ‘In fact, it might never have occurred.’ Closer, and she could see the gleaming conical shapes going about unknown tasks inexorably, and hear the throbbing electronic heartbeat that filled their city. She could hardly bear to look at the inhuman monsters who had destroyed her family life, but nor could she tear her eyes away, at least until Koschei allowed it. ‘The Daleks could never have entered your life, if Skaro had not existed long enough to unleash them.’

Victoria was almost crying to agree. She knew it was wrong, and some spark of conscience at the back of her, mind told her there must be a catch – that no solution could be so simple. The sight of the Daleks had opened old wounds, though, and triggered old pain. Pain she didn’t think she could go through again. It wasn’t as if the Daleks had ever done anything good: they had only killed and murdered.

Even the Doctor said so. After all, didn’t the Doctor himself engineer a

civil war on Skaro? But the past could not be changed; that was something else the Doctor had always been earnest about.

'The Doctor once said that you couldn't change the past, without splitting off another universe.' She wasn't sure whether she was trying to refuse, or looking for reassurance.

'In a TARDIS that is correct. This conduit directly affects space/time itself, not just locations in space/time restructuring everywhere and everywhen to take account of the new matrix. It's up to you; shall we take away your pain, and prevent the deaths of millions at the 254

hands of the Daleks? Or walk away, knowing that those people need never have died? If you have a conscience, you will agree. His voice hardened slightly. 'You will agree.'

It wasn't much of a choice, Victoria thought. Though somehow she felt a discomforting sense that something was amiss in Koschei s arguments, the pain gnawed at her, and she nodded. 'Yes,' she said softly.

'Good.' He smiled benevolently, and she felt pleased. 'Go into my TARDIS, and wait for me there. I'll join you shortly.'

Victoria went through into the annexe storeroom and into the disguised TARDIS. She was surprised to see the Doctor and Jamie, with a woman and that horrid creature. She shrank back.

'It's all right,' the Doctor said, understanding. 'This is Hakkauth.

He's a friend.' Reassured, Victoria rushed over, trying to hug both the Doctor and Jamie at the same time. 'I knew you would come,'

she squealed in delight. 'That Terrell thinks he's got us all under his thumb but Koschei has taken control of the Darkheart thing, so the Imperials can't use it.'

The Doctor frowned. 'He's taken control of it? In the hands of someone with a working knowledge of temporal mechanics. . . '

The woman shook her head. 'That's impossible.'

The Doctor frowned. 'That remains to be seen, doesn't it? Now, Jamie, Hakkauth, you two go and fetch Captain Sherwin's crewmen, and take them to the TARDIS. We'll send you up to the ship from here.'

‘But Doctor, if ye’re going to confront Koschei –’

‘Now Jamie someone who knows the TARDIS will have to take them, and you wouldn’t want Victoria to have to find her way through, would you?

‘I suppose not. . . ’

‘Exactly, so that’s what we’ll do.’

‘Surface shield generators now in firing range,’ Koskhoth reported.

‘Quantum lance at full power.’

‘Hold fire.’ Brokhyth was enraged at having to give that order, but given the choice between letting the enemy live and letting Veltroch 255

die, she knew where her duties lay.

‘Holding. Imperial gunships moving into attack position on two vectors.’

‘Ignore them, their weapons can’t harm the hull.’

Koschei watched the power-flow energy signatures scrawl across the monitors on the consoles that surrounded the nest of power linkages plugged into his TARDIS. It wouldn’t be long before the energy waves he had been monitoring were in phase, and then Terrell would be no more than an irrelevance. And of course, he could renew Ailla.

He went out into the annexe storeroom, opened the door of his TARDIS, and walked into the console room. He went straight to the open panels on the console’. A harsh actinic light glowed from somewhere deep within, as if some great power was seeking to escape.

‘Koschei, what are you doing?’ He turned, surprised. It was the Doctor, with Miss Waterfield and a woman he didn’t recognize. There was something vaguely familiar about her, though.

‘I. . . I am ensuring that it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands.’

‘What?’ The Doctor came fully into the room, arid walked around the console.

‘Perhaps destroying the Darkheart was not the best option. A device like this has the most exciting possibilities. Its value for science and

study is inestimable.'

'As is its capacity for evil if it's misused.'

Koschei raised a hand placatingly. 'That will not happen – I will ensure that it isn't misused.'

'Koschei, anyone who uses it will misuse it! Either deliberately or unintentionally. It's already been used to destroy Terileptus. . . ' The Doctor tailed off, horror spreading across his features. 'And there are only two people here who could have the knowledge to do that – you and I!'

'Make that three, Doctor, I demonstrated some minor applications to Adjudicator Terrell.'

'You did what?'

'It was the lesser of two evils, Doctor. Was I supposed to leave the 256

Darkheart running as it was until the only intelligent species in the universe was humanity? What else could I do but try to limit the damage, and keep things under control?'

'A whole race has been made extinct. That's genocide, Koschei, This Darkheart should have been switched off and destroyed!'

'I can't destroy it, Doctor, not yet.' Koschei lowered his head for a moment. 'With this, I can save Ailla.'

The woman who was with the Doctor and Miss Waterfield suddenly paled. 'You mean you've allowed the death of a whole species just so that I can live? A race died because of me?'

'What are you babbling about?'

The Doctor coughed. 'Koschei, listen to me. This is Ailla. She's one of us –'

Koschei blinked, staring at the auburn-haired woman. It was as if there was nothing else in the room but himself and her. Although she was physically dissimilar to Ailla, she had the poise and air of his companion, and he knew, just as he had recognized the Doctor when he saw his old friend's new face, that it was true. Somehow, this was Ailla. 'But. . . how?'

Ailla bowed her head in shame. 'I was told. . . not to tell you –'

‘Those. . . meddlers!’ Koschei spat. ‘So that explains your attention, and loyalty. You were spying on me. Keeping tabs on me for them, In the hope of. . . what? Being given an immediate appointment in one of the Council’s tribunals?’

She shook her head. ‘No! I’m trained to observe and report.’

His expression cleared. ‘Yes, I see that now. Oh, and it was clever.

You had me completely convinced. This betrayal will make you go far!’

‘I was willing to die to do what was right. I did lose a life –’

‘Were you? Or was I willing to kill?’

‘What’s *happened* to you?’ the Doctor asked, sounding genuinely worried for his friend. An amusingly ironic fact Koschei thought, given the circumstances. The Doctor’s worry was like a terrorist’s apology for the damage caused by his bomb: too late and contradictory to the original event.

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‘What’s happened?’ Koschei repeated in a murmur, knowing that the Doctor would hear him nonetheless. ‘My people mistrust me; I kill one of my best friends who was sent to me by the other; and both betray me.’ Koschei smiled faintly as he went on. He opened his eyes, the tawny flecks in them glittering like tiny candle flames arrayed on round mahogany as he matched the Doctor’s firm gaze. ‘I have found myself, Doctor, and I am the stronger for it.’

The delta-winged gunships that had ascended from planetary launchers swooped along the length of the *Zathakh*, pounding at the Dragon’s segmented hull to little effect.

Brandauer was all too aware that there was only an inch of metal separating him from the infinite blackness, and that the tiniest tremble of his hand on the flight controls could erase that inch in a nanosecond. It hadn’t been like this on training exercises at all. Strangely, there had been no return fire directed at his gunships, and he realized that he hadn’t seen anything that looked like a weapons emplacement on the hull at all. Perhaps that green cutting beam of theirs was their only weapon; it certainly must take up a lot of power.

He tripped the communications switch. ‘Alpha One to all craft: they

only have that one beam, that's their weakness. Alphas Three and Five, swing around and attack their solar wings. Two and Four, form up on my wing.'

The pilots were Imperial Navy, of course, not members of the Guild of Adjudicators. He didn't know them personally, and that made it easier to consider this in the same way he would look at a game of chess. Relative strangers were easier to see as pawns than were his fellow Adjudicators.

Three and Five went off on a long loop, coming back to spit thin beams of energy at the larger ship's wings. The beams simply vanished into the polished black filament. Brandauer led his wingmen at the warship head on, blasting at the eye of the quantum lance itself. If he could put their weapons out of commission, then it wouldn't matter whether they could be destroyed or not.

* * *

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The Doctor had backed off to the far side of the console while Victoria looked confused, and Ailla looked Koschei square in the eye. 'Koschei, I know you're in some sort of shock, but you must see that this is wrong.'

'Must I, Ailla? Or is that the official position?'

'That's the common-sense position. We've known each other too long – I care about you too much.'

He snapped his fingers, the gesture ending in a warning point.

'That's a human weakness, Ailla, and you will not trick me that way again.' They were both distracted, as the Doctor rapped on one of the console panels.

'What is all this junk for?' he asked. He poked a finger into the exposed wiring around the cables that were plugged into the console.

There was a crackling sound, and he whipped his hand back, sucking his fingers.

'Knowledge, Doctor, the Darkheart's true power.'

The Doctor followed the cables out of the TARDIS, to where they were

clustered in the Darkheart control room. ‘Mixing TARDIS technology with that of others is never a good idea. Or perhaps you plan to give Terrell TARDIS technology?’

‘Oh hardly. As a matter of fact, I shall take from him. I did promise I would remove the threat of –’ The door opened once more, admitting Terrell and a pair of Adjudicators.

‘Are these people bothering you, Koschei?’ Terrell asked, with a mocking smile.

Koschei nodded slightly. ‘Ah, there you are, Mr Terrell. Take the Doctor and Miss Ailla to the deepest and darkest dungeon you can find.’ Terrell hesitated, then nodded to his Adjudicators, who grabbed hold of the intruders.

The Doctor struggled uselessly against his captor’s grip, which Koschei found quite satisfying. Things were going according to plan.

He was right: it was determination that mattered. The Doctor finally broke free, and drew himself up to his full height, such as it was.

‘Koschei, stop this madness!’

Madness? No, his eyes had been opened. ‘Koschei, Doctor? Koschei died with his. . . “human” companion.’

Gillian Sherwin was quite surprised that both sets of combatants had ignored the *Piri Reis* for the time being. She was glad of that, though.

‘We are receiving numerous distress signals,’ Clark reported. ‘From escape pods, mainly. All Imperial.’

Sherwin nodded. For what had happened to Ipthiss and Salamanca and the rest, she was tempted to leave them out there. She remembered her own feelings on the prospect of death in space, however, and felt guilty about even thinking such a thing. Warn sickbay, and bring them in. Keep stewards on stand-by with weapons scanners, though; I don’t want any Imperial hotshot trying to hijack us.’

Terrell returned, much of the iron gone from his spine. ‘Koschei. All our cruisers are gone. We’re defenceless if Brokhyth gets impatient.’

‘Then your gunship pilots can’t be doing their job,’ Koschei snorted.

Victoria was not just horrified by his attitude, but dismayed too.

She could see that he was trying his best in what must surely be a very difficult time for him. He had imprisoned the Doctor, which was obviously wrong, but she felt that he might change his mind if a sympathetic ear presented itself She tried to imagine how Koschei must be feeling right now, and couldn’t. ‘You must feel as if. . . as if you’ve been cast down into the Pit.’

‘You mean Hell?’ Victoria nodded, though it was not a word that a young lady such as herself would use in polite conversation. ‘It has been frequently paraphrased that Hell is the impossibility of reason.

What no one seems to understand, Miss Waterfield, is that-Hell is not when reason is possible or impossible, but when reason is not relevant at all.’ Somehow she knew, without being told, that right now he saw no relevance in reason.

Twenty-One

Brandauer’s gunships hadn’t so much as scratched the great focusing crystals for the quantum lances, and he was beginning to doubt that anything he did would be effective.

Alpha Four swooped low across the *Zathakh*’s back, but misjudged his turn, and flew straight into one of the Dragon’s starboard wings.

A large stretch of wing simply shattered like a dropped mirror, razor-edged shards flying off in all directions as the gunship smashed clean through it.

Brandauer tried to spot the gunship from his own flight path. It was tumbling away from the wing like all the all other pieces of debris.

‘Alpha Four, are you all right?’

‘I had a hell of a shock, but the shields held.’ The tumbling gunship levelled out as its pilot recovered his senses.

That could be their weakness, Brandauer thought. Those wings were designed to absorb energy, but they were fragile. ‘All gunships charge your shields to maximum, and ram those wings.’

The Doctor had been put in a cell with no pillow, but Ailla was luckier.

It was an oversight anyone could have made, but Ailla was glad that their jailers were the ones who had made it. The Doctor told her what to do from the neighbouring cell, and she was free in moments.

Once free, she switched off the force barrier that locked the Doctor in, and he emerged into the corridor with a thankful smile. 'Typical of the regimented mind,' the Doctor commented happily. 'They're very slow to adapt to new ideas. Now we can get down to business.'

'You're one to talk. You're not exactly seen as a model citizen.'

The Doctor looked uncomfortable. 'My only sin is to be curious.

And maybe a little. . . practical – which standing around here talking is not.'

'Fine, then what do we do next? Get the shield down?'

'I think that blast we felt proves that the shield around the planet is no longer a problem. What does Koschei want with the Darkheart?'

'I don't know. He's a scholar. You've known him longer than I have.'

'I haven't seen him in what feels like a couple of hundred years, probably because it has been a couple of hundred years. I don't suppose it matters, really – the Darkheart has to be destroyed.'

'How?'

The Doctor looked rather shifty. 'Oh, I think I have an idea or two.'

He cleared his throat. 'You contact Captain Sherwin, and Brokhyth, and get to the control complex through the pyramid. The captains should be able to help you get in safely. I'll join you there after I've spoken to Victoria, and disabled that contraption of Koschei's.'

'Don't count on your friend too much,' Ailla warned. 'You saw how devoted to him she's becoming. He's a very good hypnotist.'

'Parlour trickery,' the Doctor grumbled. 'He used to do that at school, and anyone he can hypnotize, I can de-hypnotize.'

‘For your sake, I hope you’re right.’

Brokhyth almost jumped when a hail came in from the planet.

Koskhoth looked up in surprise. ‘Pack-Mother, it is the Federation diplomat, Ailla. She says she has commandeered an Imperial transmitter to report that Veltroch is not currently under direct threat.’

‘Excellent news.’ This was more like it.

‘It could be a trap,’ Koskhoth warned. ‘Perhaps to lure us into attacking, that they may have an excuse to destroy Veltroch.’

‘They seek no excuse. All Dragons, begin bombarding the deflection barrier.’ Green lightning obscured the city’s skyline momentarily as blasts from the quantum lances hit out at the shield. Koskhoth looked up from the crew pit. ‘Their shield strength is dropping. A gap is forming over the city.’

‘Excellent. Move us through the breach.’ She touched the intercom.

‘Pack-Hunter Brythal report to the flight deck immediately.’

‘They’re ramming the solar wings of all Dragons. *Khadrakh* and *Anchoth* report they have lost seventy per cent of their wing area.’

Brokhyth’s jaw stretched out. ‘The fools must think the wings are used as energy collectors. Allow the Pack-Leaders to take their own measures as appropriate.’

Gillian Sherwin had not forgotten the Doctor’s plan, but right now it had been pushed to a holding area of her mind. There were more immediate problems, such as the firefight that was breaking out around her and threatening her ship and crew.

She had considered the situation serious enough to put on her boots in case of injury, and was beginning to regret the decision, as it seemed to have adversely affected the crew’s morale. Everyone on the flight deck had taken it as a sign of trouble.

Mei Quan’s almond eyes flicked up from the tactical grid, and she gave a slight nod. ‘Captain, there’s a gap opening up in the planetary shield. *Zathakh* is moving toward it.’

Sherwin stifled a curse. ‘Block their attack vector. Take us into their path; they won’t fire on another Federation ship.’ She hoped not, anyway. If she believed in a god, she would have prayed. She especially didn’t want to die in space like that. Not frozen and asphyxiated together, or with her cells stripped away by searing fire.

Not in the emptiness.

Another Imperial gunship vanished like a popped bubble as it misjudged a banking turn and flew into the fading light of *Khadrakh*’s quantum lance. The beam shut down almost immediately. Koskhoth, watching in a viewing cube, gave a pleased growl at the human’s misfortune. ‘We are above the breach in the shield, Pack-Mother. The Federation ship is moving to block our course. Shall I rearm weapons?’

Brokhyth could still hear the echoes of her father’s voice ordering her to destroy the other ship if they attempted to interfere. They were as much victims of this circumstance as the Veltrochni, perhaps.

Besides, they couldn’t really be considered interference if they were not absolutely on the edge of destroying *Zathakh*. Nothing less would prevent Brokhyth from doing what was necessary, and the Federation ship could do nothing so effective short of ramming them. ‘No. Hold

position above the breach.’ She nodded to Brythal, who was poised at the arched entrance to the flight deck. ‘Are your troops prepared for ground assault?’

The Pack-Hunter bowed slightly, her spines quivering with excited anticipation. ‘My troops have studied Koskhoth’s schematics, of the colony most thoroughly. I have selected landing sites close to their flight coordination facility, and military headquarters.’

‘Excellent. Report to the transmat cubicles. You may begin your landings immediately.’

The sculpted form of the *Piri Reis* tilted, swooping under *Zathakh*’s nose. The Veltrochni ship was slowing, and the *Piri Reis* was able to get ahead of her.

Sherwin didn’t like this. The Veltrochni Dragon was slowing to let them past. Did Brokhyth think she wanted a piece of the Imperials’

hide too? If so, then she was in for a disappointment. Mei Quan rested

her hands beside the weapons keys. ‘They’re not firing.’ She looked at her tactical sensors. ‘I’m reading heavy phobic energy discharges from *Zathakh*.’

“Transmat beams?’

‘Captain, I’m now reading Veltrochni life-signs on the planet.’

‘Transmat beams. Can we jam the –’ The two-tone proximity alert suddenly blared. ‘What the hell?’

Sherwin felt her heart stop, as the Dragon’s all-too-solid belly skimmed past the observation viewports, close enough for her to make out the catches on the inspection panels. ‘Bloody hell!’

Then it was gone, and the return of the blackness was like a slap in the face, jolting everyone on the flight deck out of their stunned inaction. ‘They – they’re stopping,’ Mei Quan reported shakily. ‘Fourteen hundred metres to starboard.’

Fourteen hundred? That was almost touching distance. ‘Right.’ She was glad that was settled. ‘Now where are we?’ Sherwin demanded, not wanting to let her mind venture on to the subject of how close to death they had all just been. That was something she could face when

alone, back in her cabin, comforted by the plush penguin toy that lent her its silent support when she was troubled.

‘Five hundred metres above the breach,’ Van Meer reported from the helm station. He sounded as if he was trying not to cry.

‘Hold position here.’ She smiled slowly, for the benefit of the flight crew. ‘Well, while we’re here, we might as well try to get a fix on Koschei and the others.’ The practical instincts that had led her to her present posting took over. ‘Scan for any Federation communicators.

While you’re at it, see if you can get a location on the source of the shield generator.’

Now that the shield was breached, Brokhyth would avenge the Dragon that had been destroyed. She still wasn’t sure what had happened to it, but as no other ship had fired on it, the humans on the planet must have been responsible. ‘They must track us to attack. Target their flight coordination complex.’

Another Veltrochni nodded to indicate that this was done. ‘Locked,’

Koskhoth relayed.

‘Is Sherwin’s vessel in the way?’ She didn’t want to hit her newfound friend by accident.

‘No, we will be firing across their bows.’

‘Then do so.’

The *Piri Reis*’s flight deck was suddenly washed free of all colour by an actinic green glare that almost burnt the eyeballs in the instant before the observation viewport polarized. Sherwin yelped, and tried to blink away the purple haze that flooded her vision.

‘What the hell was that?’

The sharp green energy slashed through the octagonal Naval flight coordination building in less time than it took to blink.

The building simply burst and vanished like a Prince Rupert’s drop with its end broken off. Vapour and incandescent plasma washed out along the surrounding streets, charring everything in its path to ashes for hundreds of yards.

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Imperial citizens, Adjudicators, technicians, off-duty labourers, all flashed into vapour with barely enough time for a fearful scream as the rippling wall of heat swept over them. Flyers hovering low over the streets popped like balloons before they could move a fraction of the distance that the shockwave would have propelled them.

A whole segment of the city flared with dissipating hot plasma, and vanishing life.

In the Darkheart programming centre, everyone grabbed hold of suitably solid furnishings, as the room shook. ‘What in the Empress’s name was that?’ Terrell barked.

‘The Naval flight coordination centre,’ Vacano said in a muted voice.

‘They’ve just gone off the air.’

‘That alien filth. . . ’ Terrell wanted to be sick just thinking about them. If ever he had any doubts about what he was doing, they

vanished like a fading dream.

Out in the streets, Adjudicators were ushering confused-looking civilians through the rain, trying to find suitable shelters. Most of the civilians were still hanging on to whatever tawdry trinkets they considered more valuable than their own lives. They were all hunched over, like primitive cavemen afraid that a thunderstorm was the beginning of the sky falling upon their heads.

The confusion did make it that much easier, however, for Jamie and Hakkauth to lead the Federation crewmen and the others from their imposed quarters back towards the Adjudication Lodge, in whose vehicle pool the TARDIS was parked. Even so, Jamie found himself impressed by the spectacle in the empty heavens.

In all his travels with the Doctor, he'd never seen anything quite like the ripples of green lightning that were silhouetting the tops of the higher buildings. 'Here, will ye look at that.'

Hakkauth stopped, and craned his thick neck upwards. He bared his fangs as his spines quivered. 'My people are attacking, *Iirdmon*.

The green is the fire of our quantum lances. The Imperial shields will

not hold for long.' His spines flattened suddenly. 'We must go from here. We must not be under here when the shield fails.'

'In case your people start attacking the city?'

' *Iirdmon*, if those beams touch the ground, they will cut hundreds of metres into the surface of the planet. When they were used against S'Arl, they cut all the way through to the molten core.'

Jamie had learnt all too much about that when the Doctor was trying to thwart Salamander's schemes. 'Then they could turn this whole city into a giant volcano! No, wait. This planet isn't a planet, though.

The Doctor said it was. . . a hollow bubble of neutron star stuff.'

'In that case it may simply explode.' Jamie was unsure if Hakkauth was having him on. 'Come, *Iirdmon*, we must go.'

One of the Federation maintenance technicians grabbed Jamie's arm. 'Just a minute. Where is it we're going anyway?'

‘Back to the TARDIS. Anyway, the Adjudicators are all out fighting Hakkauth’s pals.’

The Federation crewman hesitated a moment, then gave in, Jaime was glad, since it wouldn’t sit well with the Doctor if he had to knock out one of the people he was supposed to be rescuing and carry him.

Twenty-Two

Brythal’s forces had already taken the Executive Tower without difficulty, and had overrun the Administration building, herding civil servants to temporary holding areas in the basement. The Adjudication Lodge itself was more heavily fortified, and a separate deflection barrier had been set up around it.

Some disruptor fire and the occasional rocket were exchanged between the Adjudicators in their headquarters and the Veltrochni in the other buildings.

So far, they had blasted plenty of holes in the buildings, but done relatively little to each other’s combative capability.

Rescuing the injured combatants hadn’t quite been the experience Jamie had hoped for. In fact, he had spent a fair bit of the last hour serving refreshments in the TARDIS, while they all waited to be picked up. Jamie was definitely beginning to regret not having stayed to help the Doctor.

Partly he was just bored, but he felt guilty, too, because he was sure that the Doctor must be in trouble, or he would have been here by now. There was a sudden knocking on the door. After a moment’s thought to recall which of the console’s many switches operated the scanner, Jamie turned it on. It was the new Ailla, without the Doctor.

When Jamie opened the doors, Ailla strode in purposefully. ‘Where’s the Doctor?’ he asked.

‘He’s gone to try to talk some sense into Koschei.’

‘I thought Koschei was on our side?

She nodded, and he could tell by the look in her eyes that it was something she didn’t really want to talk about. ‘He was.’

‘Was?’

She took a deep breath, then let it out. ‘Never mind.’ She took a small metallic disc from her pocket, and looked at Hakkauth. ‘Are you ready to rejoin your people?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Your wish is my command.’ She thumbed the tiny disc.

Jaime started as the TARDIS’s central column shuddered into life.

‘Here, what have you done?’

Exactly what the Doctor wanted. This flight has been programmed from the other TARDIS, to make sure we get to the right place.’

Gillian Sherwin was beginning to think she had seen it all on this trip, what with people transmatting through the recycling plant, and, a space battle, and half her crew changing species. She was proved wrong, when, to everyone’s surprise, a strange groaning sound heralded the matenalization of a battered wooden box at the rear of the *Piri Reis*’s flight deck.

The stewards stationed around the flight deck stepped forward, stunguns at the ready, as a door opened. Two people she didn’t know and a Veltrochni emerged. One was a young man in a kilt like Scots of Old Earth wore in history tapes. ‘And you are?’

‘I’m James McCrimmon, but you can call me Jamie.’ He gave a slightly embarrassed bow. ‘I think we met at the reception.’

Sherwin remembered – this young man had been with the Doctor.

‘Of course, you spoke to the Doctor while he was here, which means you –’ she turned to the Veltrochni’– must be Hakkauth?’

‘That is correct,’ Hakkauth rasped. ‘Captain, I must return to the planet as soon as is possible. I have unfinished business there.’

Sherwin could imagine. ‘Well, the battle up here seems to be over for the moment, but we’re rather busy. I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Captain,’ the other woman said, ‘Hakkauth is right. There is still a great danger to be averted.’

Why was it, Sherwin wondered, that when you were busiest, everyone suddenly thought they were an expert? ‘And you are?’

The woman took on a wry expression. ‘Would you believe me if I said I was Ailla?’

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Gillian was about to say no, and most emphatically, but hesitated.

Given what had happened to Salamanca. . . ‘What was I doing when we first met?’

‘Eating some sort of chicken or turkey.’

Gillian stepped back slightly. ‘So is this a disguise, or some sort of effect of the Darkheart?’

‘A little of both, perhaps. Captain, could you contact Pack-Mother Brokhyth?’

‘Yes. What should I tell her?’

‘I’m going to need her people to evacuate the population of the colony.’

The captain was astounded. Brokhyth was hardly likely to agree to that. ‘I hope you have a good reason for her. These aren’t her favourite people in the cosmos. They’ve already destroyed Terileptus and they’ve threatened Veltroch.’

‘The destruction of the Darkheart will have some unpleasant side effects. I’ll just have to convince her that there’s no such thing as a warlike people, just warlike leaders. Terrell had Pack Huthakh destroyed to protect the fact of the colony’s existence.’

Hakkauth’s spines bristled. ‘Then I will come too.’

‘Aye,’ Jamie agreed, ‘and me.’

Ailla held up a hand. ‘You can follow us down. First you might like to look in on Koschei. I think maybe the Doctor might need some backup.’

Hakkauth growled dangerously. ‘This Terrell murdered my people.’

‘Then I’ll tell you what, we’ll save him for you, and keep him nice and

fresh till you get there.'

Terrell sat by the pearlescent trident monolith, wondering where he had gone wrong. Once, he had been the most important man here, doubly so because of his ordinariness. Now, he was besieged. Contact with the Adjudication Lodge was intermittent, and the Naval squadron in orbit had been destroyed.

Even Brandauer hadn't checked in, and was probably dead.

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Yet there was still hope of survival. One chance to set things right.

It was all he had ever wanted to do – make things just so. He stood and went over to where Vacano and his technicians were rewiring all the junction boxes.

How soon?'

'A few minutes. We can't cut Koschei's link to the system, so he will still have dual control, but at least he can't cut our power either.'

'Good. Recalibrate the target for a temporal shift. Minus three million years.'

Out in the open streets near the Adjudication Lodge, disruptor fire slammed into Brythal from four different sources, the impact making her reel. Evidently the humans were unaware that the holosuit built into Veltrochni armour was designed to absorb and redirect energy.

Their energy weapons merely made her ripple and waver, making her an even harder target to hit anyway.

She fired back with her favoured kinetic energy weapon, which used electromagnetic power to propel a solid dart. It was silent, with no muzzle flare. As the Adjudicators fell back under her advance, they came into range of the claws and axes of two more Hunters, who were hanging on to walls behind them.

While the Hunters tore through the four Adjudicators, Brythal's wrist communicator crackled and she stepped into the cover of a ruined wall to answer it. It was her mother, Brokhyth. 'Brythal, I have a new target for you.'

'Mother?'

‘I am transmatting a human female down to rendezvous with you.

She will identify herself as Ailla. She will lead you to the source of the weapon which destroyed the Dragon *Bradath*, and the leader of the humans. You are to capture this weapon and await the arrival of another human called the Doctor. Adjudicator In Extremis Terrell is to be taken alive – the last survivor of Pack Huthakh has an appointment with him.’

Brythal bared her fangs. ‘Understood.’ No sooner had the communication ended, than an unarmoured human female coalesced amidst 272

a haze of excess energy. Brythal towered over the human, who looked her straight in the eye without flinching. That was a rare trait for a human. ‘You are Ailla?’

‘That’s right. We’d better get moving, because we may not have much time.’

Did the human think she could order a Veltrochni Hunter around so easily? Typical of them. ‘Then do not waste time with speech.’

Terrell could hear weapons fire and screams from the maze of alleyways that cut through the inner surface of the planet around the Darkheart complex. They would be too late. ‘Damn!’ Vacano snapped behind him.

Terrell turned from the trident monolith, and echoed the sentiment.

They were surrounded.

Ailla had never been used to the sight of corpses, though she knew that people died, sometimes as a result of necessary actions.

Now that Brythal and her Hunters had reached the Darkheart complex itself, the fighting was hand to hand, as the Imperials didn’t dare risk hitting the vast coolant pipes or energy-sensitive monoliths with disruptor blasts.

In such a combat between humans used to wielding energy weapons, and axe-wielding arboreal people with three-inch claws designed for moving around trees, the outcome was never in doubt.

The Veltrochni had a natural advantage, not just in their inherent weapons, but in the ability to manoeuvre along vertical surfaces and

even ceilings, while the human Adjudicators were left milling around on the floor.

Ailla was only a few steps behind Brythal when the Veltrochni finally reached the operations centre of the control area. All the people here – including Terrell – were unarmed, and waiting to surrender.

Although most of the technicians looked nervous as the Veltrochni ushered them out, Ailla saw that Terrell had a superior expression, almost as if he thought he had won. Normally, she was opposed to needless violence, but after all that had gone before, Ailla felt the 273

need to take out her ire on someone, and his smug look was a handy trigger. She back-handed him across the jaw.

'Temper,' he cautioned her. He did nothing else, which was hardly surprising considering the company she was in.

'You have an appointment with a friend of mine, Terrell. The last survivor of the Veltrochni Pack you murdered. I understand he has a rather low opinion of you personally.'

'I think you'll find that none of this matters You're too late.' He nodded towards some ruined consoles. 'The Darkheart is programmed and running. In a little over fifteen minutes, the Veltrochni will never have existed.'

'You obviously have no sense of timing,' a new voice said from the shadows: Koschei emerged, holding a half-stripped disruptor which had a few extra circuits hanging from it. He nodded companionably to Ailla. 'Well done, Ailla. It seems Mr Terrell has fallen into our trap completely.'

'Our trap?'

Koschei nodded, his eyes full of concern. 'I'm sorry I couldn't let you know what I had in mind but after your. . . accident, I couldn't be sure that you would be able to fool Terrell and the others if you knew the truth.'

Ailla was totally baffled. 'You mean this has all been a trick?'

'But of course. The Doctor and his friends are, at this moment, in the control room I had constructed, with total access to the Darkheart's control systems. He turned to Terrell. 'I'm sorry, but I'm afraid your countdown can be stopped at any time.' Ailla felt her spirits lift.

Somehow she should have known it was all a ruse – this wasn't the first time they had played such a role, and his point about her regeneration was quite reasonable. She wasn't quite the person she had been.

Koschei exchanged a look with Terrell, and quietly slipped a small disruptor into the Adjudicator In Extremis's palm as Ailla and Brythal turned away. Terrell frowned, and looked at Koschei questioningly.

Koschei shot him. Ailla and Brythal turned, to see Terrell twist and writhe as his body collapsed in on itself. By the time the disruptor he

dropped had hit the ground, his body was the size of a child s doll.

'Where life has no value Mr Terrell, sometimes death has its price.' He looked at Ailla. 'He was about to kill you.'

Ailla calmed herself from the momentary shock. 'He can get in the queue like everybody else.'

The Doctor tiptoed up to the corner that overlooked the door to Koschei's control room, and poked his head around for a look.

Through the open door he could see Victoria watching the progress of the battle in a holosphere. There was no sign of Koschei.

Straightening his bow he, for all the difference it made, the Doctor slipped into the control room, and hurried across to Victoria. She turned at his approach, and her face lit up. 'Doctor! Has Koschei freed you?'

'Not exactly, Victoria. Where is Koschei anyway!'

'I'm not sure. He went to organize the Adjudicators defending the building, I think. Doctor, if you weren't released, you must go back to your cell. . . '

'Must?' The Doctor was dismayed, and yet she seemed to think it was a quite reasonable request. 'What sort of talk is that?' He felt his expression darken. 'Of course. . . He's hypnotized you!' He took her shoulder in one hand, and snapped his fingers in front of her eyes.

'What Koschei is doing is wrong! Now snap out of it!'

'I shouldn't bother with that if I were you, Doctor,' Koschei said from

the doorway. He held a circuit board in one hand and a modified disruptor pistol in the other. ‘Miss Waterfield has chosen her own path, as do we all.’

‘The path you’re taking leads only to evil, Koschei.’

‘Evil? I will show you evil, Doctor.’ He moved to the holosphere, and focused it on the battle raging outside, The Doctor looked on, eyes wide with horror as sharp blasts of light flickered from dozens of disruptors below. Beams of coherent energy flashed one way, and the sounds of tiny rapid explosions and screams flew the other.

Koschei gave the Doctor a burning look. ‘You see? Chaos.’ He snapped his fingers, the sound punctuating the gesture as he turned 275

his hand to point towards the battle far below. ‘Lack of precision. Lack of organization. Lack of order.’ He nodded to himself ‘Lack, in short, of control.’

The Doctor was doubtful. ‘Control?’

‘Of course!’ Koschei had the expression of someone forced to repeat the obvious to a stubborn child. ‘To have stability and order, all variables must be monitored and controlled – and I can do that from here.’

‘Koschei, you can’t monitor the entire Universe of time and space.

It would be like trying to catch every drop of rain from a monsoon in one thimble. You’d get lots of exercise I’m sure, but in the end it would be a complete waste of time!,

Koschei smiled faintly, and shook his head. ‘On the contrary, my dear Doctor, it will be a very precise use of time. Once my TARDIS’s basic structure is imposed on the Darkheart, the Darkheart will, in essence, become my TARDIS. I will be able to configure and manipulate the vortex itself with surgical precision. In many ways, my TARDIS and I will be part of the vortex, simultaneously existing in every point in space and time. Omniscient, and omnipotent. Now imagine it: epidemics, war, random violence, negligence, these are things without purpose. Imagine if there were no more of such things

– only peace and harmony: everyone fitting neatly into his or her place in the universe. Then, no more failures. No more deaths without purpose. No more –’

‘No more freedom! Koschei, this is insane!’

‘Insane? Doctor, you know what it’s like out there.’ He jabbed a finger at his old friend almost accusingly. ‘You yourself have always fought to defend against the anarchy that pervades the cosmos.

Daleks, Cybermen. . . Don’t you ever get tired of always reacting to what has happened? Only picking up the pieces, but never being able to prevent the breakage in the first place?’ He leant in closer. ‘Most doctors will say that prevention is better than cure. Perhaps someday you’ll see that too. For decades I’ve crossed from one side of the galaxy to the other, picking up the pieces in conflicts from the Madillon Cluster to the Skonnan Empire, but this. . . ’ He broke off, turning

away for a moment, before facing the Doctor with new light in his eyes. ‘This could be the single artefact that ends the chaos once and for all. With the Darkheart at my command, wars could be nipped in the bud, anarchy banished to the realms of fiction.’

The Doctor stepped back, his face a mask of dismay. ‘But you can’t mean that! Don’t you hear what you’re really saying? The path you’re considering leads to totalitarianism. You’re offering a universe of. . .

of –’

Koschei slapped the console, the noise silencing the Doctor. ‘I offer the universe order!’ he snapped. ‘Order out of chaos. With the enhancements I can make to the timeline –’

‘Enhancements? Perversions, you mean! I’ve heard that one before: *ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer* – wasn’t that how it went?’ The Doctor’s face lit up. ‘Anyway, you must know that you can’t go altering the timeline like that. All you would do is split off a series of alternative realities.’

Koschei smiled slowly, a look of superiority that said he already had a solution to that problem. ‘Can’t I, indeed? You always were a late developer, Doctor. You should have paid more attention in Cosmic Science classes.’ He nodded. ‘By the use of our technology, you are correct, but the species who constructed the Darkheart. . . Ah, now they are far more intimately familiar with the manipulation of time than we are.’

‘You know who they were?’

‘You mean you don’t?’ Koschei tutted softly. ‘Even the Chronovores

have their off days. This Darkheart was constructed by them – or, more accurately, the creatures which evolved into them. It was intended to nurture and feed ailing, injured and infant Chronovores with energy from the vortex, before they moved to their current plane.

It could deliver nourishing energy to any place and time in which one of them was stranded and weak. It can, of course, still deliver energy, but now there are no Chronovores on this plane to absorb it.'

The Doctor gaped, turning on his heel to survey the surroundings.

'Then this is all a healing device?'

'It was. It can directly affect past, present or future events, but very 277

neatly. If I destroy Veltroch, for example, another race would have suppressed the Tzun.'

The Doctor's face darkened again. 'But to pervert it into a weapon is. . . monstrous!'

'These humans are your favourite species, Doctor. Perhaps you made a bad choice in that regard. They, after all, are the ones who originated that idea.' Koschei spread his hands in a gesture of open friendship. 'It can still be used to heal, however. To heal the dissent in the universe by surgically removing the dead wood with minimal collateral damage.'

'Time travel isn't bonsai, you know!'

'We are the same, Doctor, you and I. I'm giving you the chance to do all that you can to help and protect the citizens of the universe, all in one simple package. We can maintain peace and harmony the likes of which the universe has never known.'

'Me?' The Doctor sounded dismayed.

'Just imagine it for a moment. No one need ever be murdered, raped or robbed; no one need ever feel the pain of loss or betrayal, because the cosmos is a cohesive society governed by a single rule – ours.

Koschei looked into space, his eyes unfocusing slightly. 'How might your favourite species put it? "Let the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man hide themselves in the dens

and in the rocks of the mountains.”’ He laughed, sounding like someone who had not done so in a very long time.

‘Koschei, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you’ve lost all your marbles!’

‘If so, then your behaviour isn’t likely to placate me.’ He leant forward. ‘You are a renegade from our people too, Doctor. Is it so good to be constantly looking over your shoulder?’

‘No but there are worse things, and what you’re planning is one of them. I can’t allow you to do what you’re planning.’

Koschei sighed sadly. ‘I was afraid you may take that stance, Doctor.

As it happens, not only are you not going to stop me, but you will assist in my experiment.’

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‘Whatever gives you that idea?’ The Doctor folded his arms like a petulant child.

Koschei stepped aside to Victoria, raising the gun.

The Doctor

looked a little panicked, then relaxed as his old friend handed her the weapon. ‘Miss Waterfield, would you be so good as to point the gun at your head?’ She did as she was told. ‘If the Doctor does not obey the instructions I give him, you will pull the trigger. Do you understand me?’

‘I understand.’

Koschei matched the Doctor’s worried gaze with a calm one of his own. ‘Well, it seems the old saying is true – a ship cannot have two captains. So as far as the cosmos is concerned –’ he smiled, with the air of a prisoner realizing that his shackles have fallen away for good’–

there can only be one Master!’

The Doctor tried to step closer to Victoria, but Koschei caught his eye, and shook a finger in a warning gesture. ‘Keep an eye on the capacitance banks, Doctor. I will need to know when the Darkheart reaches full charge.’

‘Then you switch in your dematerialization circuit and feed it back

into the Darkheart. . . ’

‘Yes, and I wouldn’t think of leaving the charge too long, if I were you. Miss Waterfield, if the Doctor attempts to speak with you, or to alter the settings on these consoles, you will pull the trigger.’

‘I will obey.’

Koschei smiled faintly. ‘She knows her place – the benefits of a classical education.’ He stepped back into his TARDIS doorway. ‘Remember, Doctor, when the capacitance banks reach full charge, switch the power through to the TARDIS. Miss Waterfield’s life depends on your precision.’

The Doctor slowly reached out to the wrong panel, then he glanced at Victoria, and resignedly threw the power transfer switch.

Jamie thought for a moment that he was drunk, as there was that same off-balance sensation of falling, but then a corridor of plain sloped walls and recessed lights steadied around him. Hakkauth gave

a low growl beside him. ‘Are you well?’

‘Aye, I was just a bit. . . ’

‘Transmats can have that effect the first few times. You will get used to it.’ Jamie sincerely hoped he wouldn’t have to get used to it – even the TARDIS was a better way to travel than that. There didn’t seem to be anyone around, though a rising hum of power was audible from the other side of an open pair of doors.

‘They must be in there, if Ailla was right. Come on.’ Jamie led the towering alien through the double door, and felt his heart leap into his throat as he saw Victoria holding a gun to her own head. Koschei’s TARDIS was beginning to fade, and a deep throbbing was filling the air. The Doctor turned as Jamie stepped towards Victoria. ‘No, Jamie, she’s been hypnotized to kill herself if I. . . ’ He looked up with wide eyes. ‘If I try to interfere. Koschei didn’t know you’d be here! Quickly Jamie!’

Jamie didn’t need any more urging, and Victoria didn’t move, as he pulled the gun from her hand. ‘Why are you interfering, Jamie?’ she asked dreamily. ‘Koschei is going to save my father. . . ’

The Doctor was right enough, he saw, that she was bewitched.

Koschei's voice came over the intercom from his TARDIS. 'I can feel the power, Doctor. I can touch it. . . ' The Doctor dashed round the consoles, switching off every circuit he could find. 'Doctor! What are you doing? Miss Waterfield, pull the trigger!'

Victoria's finger twitched against the empty air, and she blinked into wakefulness. Hakkauth punched an armoured fist into the heart of the main power console, and ripped out a clutch of sparking wires.

Flashes and puffs of smoke burst from the electronic lash-up, forcing Hakkauth to jerk back. Koschei's TARDIS solidified with a sudden crash, and Jamie covered the door with the gun he had taken from Victoria.

Koschei hastily shut down panels on the TARDIS console, as sparks writhed around the central column. Fast as he was, his hands couldn't move faster than the electrical discharges, and he soon saw that he would have to shut it down completely.

He reached across to the main switch, and hesitated as a read-out caught his eye. The smile that started to creep across his face was quickly extinguished, though, as he threw the main switch too late, and a crackle of energy knocked him, stunned, to the floor.

Victoria was glad to be still alive, but wondered if she really should be, after all the things he had done. She cried, though she wasn't sure why. 'We were doing good, Doctor. He said we would destroy the Daleks. . . '

The Doctor nodded, his arm around her as they sat by the holosphere. 'I know. It's a great temptation, but power corrupts, Victoria, and something as powerful as the Darkheart corrupts more powerfully.'

'But I helped him to do horrid things. . . ' It was an awful feeling, wondering if you were the same as those you opposed. 'I was willing to destroy a world.'

'Now, Victoria, you mustn't think like that. You were hypnotized, and not in control of your own actions.' Jamie nodded in agreement, while Hakkauth's spines rustled inscrutably. There was a sudden flurry of motion, as Koschei shoved the Doctor aside, and twisted Jamie's wrist to force him to give up the disruptor.

He then stepped over to the console, keeping the gun on them all as

he, scooped up the circuits from his TARDIS. The Doctor sidled around the console drawing Koschei's attention away from Jamie and Hakkauth. 'Koschei –'

'That name no longer has any meaning for me, Doctor. In time you too will call me Master.' Koschei swung the gun to cover Victoria and snapped his fingers, halting Jamie and Hakkauth in mid-step. 'Don't imagine for a moment that either of you could reach me before I send Miss Waterfield to join her father.'

'Ye scunner,' Jamie muttered. 'Don't you care about anyone?'

Koschei appeared to consider this for a moment. 'No,' he said calmly. 'No, I do not. So I advise you both to be very careful in what you say and do, or, unlike Miss Waterfield, you may live to regret it.'

'I've already destroyed the energy feeds here, Koschei,' said the Doc-281

tor. 'You can't incorporate the Darkheart into your TARDIS from here.'

'You never did understand. It's already done. Conscience doth make cowards of us all, Doctor. But not any longer – all I need do is return these components to my TARDIS, and dematerialize.' He backed off towards the door, holding Victoria around the shoulders. Once he reached the doorway, he fired a burst into the consoles, sending everyone diving for cover as they erupted into flame.

He then shoved Victoria into the room, discarding her carelessly, and blasted the controls on the outside of the doors. They obediently slammed shut.

Ailla looked up as a keening howl rolled across the skies. Patches of the hilltop landscape were fading in fits and starts, while the grey fuzziness overhead billowed in on itself, as if it was being sucked away through a straw. 'What the hell is happening?'

The Doctor approached Hakkauth cautiously. 'Erm, excuse me a moment, but what about your communicator? Couldn't Pack-Mother Brokhyth transmat us directly to the control area?'

'The transmat beams will not penetrate so deeply into the planet.

However, they could transport us to the pyramid.'

'Well then, that's what we should be doing! Jamie and Victoria can go

to Captain Sherwin's ship, and you can send me to the pyramid to join Ailla.'

'I will go to the pyramid with you. I have a responsibility to my people.'

'Me too,' Jamie added. 'I'm not letting ye go after that Koschei on your own.'

'Well it's not really up to me, is it, Jamie? It's Brokhyth's transmat system, so it's up to her what she does with it.' He lowered his voice.

'Besides, I want to keep Victoria as far from Koschei as possible. His influence over her will fade the longer she's away from his control.'

Jamie looked rebellious, which was probably an occupational haz-ard for a Jacobite, but then acquiesced.

* * *

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Ailla was poring over the glistening sides of the monoliths when the Doctor and Hakkauth raced through the alleyways and leapt into the control centre. By the time they reached the central area with the monoliths and shattered Imperial consoles, a clock on the wall showed they had only a minute, and a half left, and it counted down as they watched. 'Great jumping gobstoppers,' the Doctor wailed. 'Is that the time?'

Ailla looked on in confusion as the Doctor hopped around the filigreed monoliths, coat-tails flapping wildly. 'What are you doing here?'

'Koschei's trying to incorporate the Darkheart into his TARDIS, to give him the ability to directly alter Time. We have to destroy the whole complex.'

'That's what we were se– That's what we think we came here for in the first place.'

The Doctor clasped his hands and looked rather smug. 'I rather thought so. . . ' He cleared his throat. 'I've set the spatial coordinates for this planet's parent neutron star.'

'But –'

'Well, don't you see? This Darkheart thing draws its power from the

kinetic energy of the two masses that should constitute a black hole. If I short out the dimensional bridge that separates them, by locking the spatial coordinates on to the neutron star and triggering the Darkheart, those masses will recombine as a normal astronomical body.'

Allia shook her head. 'But that'll destroy this colony!'

'It should take a few hours for the gravitational effects to reach us.

Hopefully the various ships in orbit can evacuate everyone.'

Koschei stood in the console room of his TARDIS gazing unblinkingly at a small panel on the console. It was labelled INTERIOR SPACE

ALLOCATION. Beside it, a monitor showed a tangled mass of curved graph lines.

Koschei selected one section, and highlighted it for deletion, He stood for a moment, then flicked the EXECUTE switch with a dismissive wave.

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Ailla's quarters vanished from the TARDIS, tossed into the chaotic void of the space/time vortex. Koschei then opened an inspection panel on the console, and physically tore out a chunk of crystal which had delicate circuits embedded in it. 'Just so they don't get any ideas about dragging me home.' He dropped the crystal to the floor, and smashed it with his heel. 'I will go back when I am ready, and not before.'

He closed the inspection panel, and leant on the console for a moment. 'Suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune?' he scoffed.

He set a new course on the console, and threw the dematerialization switch.

'Not to be.' Koschei threw the switch.

The greyness that surrounded the hilltop amphitheatre vanished, causing everyone to look up in alarm. 'It s started,' the Doctor exclaimed. 'We have to get out of here.'

'You said we had hours,' Hakkauth protested.

‘On our side of the dimensional bridge, not here!’ They ran, as a rushing wind began blowing uphill. In moments, they were struggling against the airflow, as the atmosphere was rushing away. Fortunately the walls of the alleys gave them something to hang on to, and they managed to pull themselves into the staircase.

The Dragons *Zathakh*, *Khadrakh* and *Anchoth* took up positions a mile above the summit of the squat pyramid. Queues of Imperial citizens were waiting below, sparkling into nothingness in groups of a dozen at a time.

In the skies beyond, the giant red star swelled to one side, as if it was the face of a boxer with a cauliflower ear.

Koschei froze as the TARDIS shuddered, its walls rippling. ‘What?’

Ailla was almost certain that things were back to normal when they emerged out on to the summit of the pyramid. There was very little noise of shooting from the city, although fires were raging all over the place.

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‘I think it was General Lee who said “It is well that war is so terrible, for we would grow too fond of it,” the Doctor quoted.

‘We already have. I mean, humans already have.’ It was hard not to think of herself as human. It had been such a long time, after all. At the foot of the pyramid, Veltrochni were herding prisoners for transmatting. One Dragon had come down, and was hovering low over the city to receive the prisoners and evacuees. Its wings were strangely moth eaten, she noticed.

Brythal’s spines quivered. ‘That is *Zathakh*, my mother’s Dragon.’

‘Then I suggest you contact her,’ the Doctor told her, sounding rather panicked. Ailla looked round to see what was upsetting him, and saw that a tornado of air was swirling around the apex of the pyramid, and funnelling down into the structure.

As she watched, the pyramid began to deflate, the centre of each wall sagging inward bizarrely. Then the transmat beams surrounded her.

Koschei screamed, his body feeling vastly unbalanced. The TARDIS

was screaming too, as its walls bulged inwards.

With every ounce of strength he could muster, Koschei stretched out a hand that seemed to weigh as much as a planet towards the dematerialization switch. It seemed to take a lifetime to get there.

Buildings crumpled and twisted into bizarre spires as they flowed upwards from the surface of the planet. Hard radiation flooded the surface as it liquefied and shifted. Slowly, the planet contracted.

Brokhyth was quite amused by her prisoners. She had expected to hate them, but their fear was clearly a more fitting punishment. Less amusing was the sight on her main viewer.

Space was twisting between the neutron star and the planet, both of which were distorting out of shape. 'Gravitational pressures increasing,' Koskhoth shouted over the noise of the strained engine. 'We may not have enough power to get out of the gravity well.'

'Divert all power to engines!'

* * *

The ribbon of distorted space finally coalesced, both star and planet colliding in an enormous flare of radiation, while simultaneously fading. As if the radiation blast had provided a boost to the ship, *Zathakh* leapt forward, as did all the other Dragons, and the *Piri Reis*.

The Doctor, standing on the flight deck of *Zathakh*, let out a long breath. Ailla did likewise, though she hadn't realized she had been holding her breath. 'What about Koschei? Did he get the Darkheart?'

'If he had, we wouldn't be looking at that.' The Doctor indicated the funnel of gases being sucked away from the red giant into a patch of emptiness. 'I think it would be fairer to say the Darkheart got him.

It isn't very wise to allow your ship to fall into a black hole. Not even a TARDIS.'

'Perhaps *they* were right about him after all.' She shook her head.

'He was a good man.'

'Yes, he was. Until the end.'

With every ounce of strength he could muster, Koschei stretched out a hand that seemed to weigh as much as a planet towards the

dematerialization switch. It seemed to take a lifetime to get there.

The command crew of the *Piri Reis* all glanced floorwards when Gillian Sherwin came on duty after a much-needed rest. Her bare feet seemed to reassure them that things were back to something approaching normal.

Ailla was waiting by the TARDIS for the Doctor and his friends. The Doctor was shaking the captain's hand in both of his. 'Normally I hate goodbyes, but it seems I can't really avoid this one, can I?'

'Not while your transmat pod, or whatever it is, is on my flight deck, no.' She kissed his cheek. 'For luck.'

He laughed softly, and stepped aside so that Jamie could shake her hand. 'Bye then.' He smiled hopefully, but she just nodded. He went into the TARDIS a little selfconsciously.

Victoria shook Sherwin's hand with a little curtsey. 'Goodbye.'

'Be seeing you.'

The Doctor looked at Brokhyth, who loomed behind Sherwin. 'And what about you?'

'All know how the Veltrochni treat those who kill our children.

Someday, I will find this Koschei. Until then we will. . . educate the Imperial citizens in Federation manners.'

'Speaking of Koschei,' Ailla said hurriedly. 'He's taken our TARDIS, and –'

'And you wondered if you could come with us?' the Doctor asked, a teasing light in his eyes.

'Not exactly. I hoped you would take me home.'

The Doctor sidled away slightly. 'Oh, now, you know I can't really control this old TARDIS of mine. . . '

Ailla was afraid he'd see it that way. 'Doctor, I was hoping you wouldn't make me do this, but they want this TARDIS back.' She hefted a stun-gun she had palmed from one of the stewards. 'I don't want to have to arrest you, but –'

Sherwin and Brokhyth, moving as one, grabbed Ailla, pinning her arms to her sides. ‘I guess we owe you this much Doctor,’ the captain told him. ‘You’d better get going.’

The Doctor gave her a relieved smile, and backed into the TARDIS

doorway. ‘This is a very peaceful century, Ailla, I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.’

He disappeared into the TARDIS, and Brokhyth and Sherwin released her as the raucous groaning started up from somewhere deep inside.

‘Doctor, if you come back now, I’ll put in a good word for you. I can’t say fairer than that. . . ’ But it was too late: the TARDIS had faded away. Ailla looked around at the barely contained smiles that surrounded her, and they just added to her anger. ‘I’ll get you for this!’

She gritted her teeth, and looked at Captain Sherwin. ‘I don’t suppose you have an opening for a new crew member?’

Victoria watched the image of the spaceship fade from the scanner. All those people. . . It was horrible. She knew that they had engineered their fate themselves, but it was such a terrible tragedy.

She wished the TARDIS had never brought her here. The events on Darkheart would still have happened – or maybe Terrell would have 287

spread their evil through even more of the universe – but at least she wouldn’t have to try to sleep at night with the memory. She knew it wasn’t really the Doctor’s fault, since he couldn’t control the TARDIS, but she wished there was something he could do. All the danger and death she saw on her travels was just too painful. It seemed that no sooner had they made new friends than someone was attacking them.

Somehow that wasn’t so bad on Earth: there was always some other area where she could still meet other people like herself. Out on another world, she couldn’t be left behind. Perhaps most of all she needed a sense of continuity, or a home.

She looked across the room, to where the Doctor was squirting oil from a small can into a squeaky lever on the console, and Jamie was testing it after every squirt, to the Doctor’s annoyance. They could set aside the horrors so easily, though she knew that Jamie, at least, had nightmares from time to time. Victoria couldn’t put the memories aside so easily, and perhaps that was why she felt that. . . well, that

she didn't really belong with them any more. She wished she could tell them how she felt, but she couldn't. It would hurt them too much if they knew her thoughts.

She would tell them soon enough. The TARDIS seemed to visit Earth so often that she was sure it wouldn't be long before they returned there. Before they returned home. The Doctor stepped back from the console. 'There we are. Everything shipshape again.'

Jamie nodded rather distantly, his eyes focused on the scanner screen. 'Aye, and it's probably just as well – we're landing in the sea!'

With every ounce of strength he could muster, Koschei stretched out a hand that seemed to weigh as much as a planet, towards the dematerialization switch. It seemed to take a lifetime to get there.

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